



P U F F I N



C L A S S I C S

PREMCHAND

A Winter's Night
and other stories

INTRODUCTION BY GULZAR

Ten classic stories from the master of Hindi literature

Nearly a century after they were written, in Hindi and Urdu, Premchand's numerous short stories, novels and plays continue to be a mirror to Indian society and its traditions.

A Winter's Night and Other Stories brings together, for young readers, some of his most powerful short stories. This is a world inhabited by people like Halku, forced to spend the bitterly cold winter night in the open, without a blanket; Kaki, the old invalid aunt, ill-treated by her own relatives; and Shankar, reduced to being a bonded labourer for the sake of a handful of wheat. Premchand describes their plights with unflinching honesty. Yet all is not hopeless in this world. There is also little Hamid, who buys tongs for his old grandmother rather than toys for himself; Ladli, who saves her share of puris for her blind aunt; and Big Brother, trying in vain to remember the strange names of English kings and queens.

Greed, dishonesty, cruelty abound in this world, as do kindness, bravery and humour. These ten stories are an ideal introduction to Premchand and his concerns and ideas that remain relevant to this day.

CLASSIC PLUS: FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR, HIS
WORK AND HIS WORLD

TRANSLATED FROM THE HINDI BY RAKHSHANDA JALIL

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Introduction

Munshi Premchand, one of India's most loved and admired writers, died on 8 October 1936, succumbing to the stomach ulcers that had troubled him for some time. He was only fifty-six. I have often wished that he had lived longer, for I was destined to meet him in more ways than one. At that time of course, I was just two and lived in Dina, a distant town in a part of Punjab which now falls in Pakistan.

The fact is that he is one of the authors of whom I have a distinct memory from a very early age. I must have been nine or ten then and that's a very impressionable age. I can't say that my impressions had only to do with what he wrote. In fact, it was a more intimate connection. His stories were a witness to what I saw around me as a child, a part of my earliest experiences and so they seemed a part of me.

At the time of my first encounter with him, I was in the fifth standard at school. I read '*Hajj-e-Akbar*', a very heartrending story and cried every time I re-read it. One day I saw my father sniffing as he read out something from a book to my mother. As I went up to them, I saw that he was reading the same story from my textbook.

Another time, my mother asked me to read out the same story to her, for she didn't know Urdu and I did. She began to sob even before I could finish the story. So did I. We never managed to finish the story, though we tried to, several times after that. The reaction was the same every time . . . we would both dissolve into tears before we could reach the end of the story. Looking back, I now wonder at Munshi Premchand's powers as a writer and whether there was a particular age group he wrote for. His story had managed to elicit a similar reaction from a child as well as grown-up parents.

At home, we had a tandoor in the courtyard, as was traditional in most households in Punjab. My mother used to bake rotis every evening. She would wet her hand, place the roti on her palm and in seconds would place it inside the burning tandoor to bake it. Despite her expertise she often had burn marks on her arms and occasionally bandaged fingers too, for the burns. That used to disturb me, but I never expressed it.

A few years later my textbook at school had another story by Premchand. It was a story called '*Idgah*' and uncannily it mirrored what I had observed

in my own life. Hamid's granny burns her fingers every day in the choolha (oven) while cooking and baking rotis. That used to disturb him, but he never said anything. Ultimately, on the occasion of Id, Hamid buys a chimta (tongs) after having saved up his pocket money to provide relief to his granny's bandaged fingers.

That was my early identification with Munshi Premchand. The stories were melodramatic perhaps, but effective. The characters looked simple, had simple desires, simple values, and simple morals. The narratives too were straightforward and everything was well explained. Nothing was left unsaid, not even the working of the mind. Whatever the character was thinking, was explained before his or her action.

When I grew up, literature became a passion with me. Now, in college I started looking at things differently. I chose books from important writers in languages other than Urdu and English. These were books which I thought I must read, even if it meant reading them in translation.

The social patterns of our world were changing too. We had travelled down a decade or so after independence. Like many others I was idealistic and full of great hopes for myself and the country.

At this juncture, I came across Munshi Premchand again. He was an acclaimed writer of Urdu and Hindi. (He wrote in both the languages with ease, and also translated his work from one language to the other himself.) The Utopian idealism underlying his work seemed both robust and attainable. His belief in social morals looked healthy and convincing. Premchand believed that these goals of reform could be achieved through 'useful literature'. In one of his speeches at Madras in 1934, he had said: 'Without idealism, what is the use of literature? Without idealism, it is only to entertain and satisfy the lust for the amazing.' He expected literature to play the role of a reformist.

On a personal level, Premchand now sounded different to me from what I remembered of him during my schooldays. If anything, the social relevance of his stories became more striking. I began to see that his characters had a socioeconomic background, which was responsible for their behaviour patterns. Their acts and morals were the result of their economic vulnerability; in fact their poverty and deprivation denied them the luxury of having any ideals or convictions. Now his characters certainly didn't look as simple as before. Or perhaps I should say that despite their

simplicity, there was a hint that there was more to them than could be understood at the first reading.

That was the time when I started making a more subjective selection and began to form a personal opinion about his stories. I liked some. Some I didn't like at all. And now decades after independence, many a social issue had reared its ugly head once more in society. Evils, which we thought existed only because of the ills of British rule, persisted even after independence. Take zamindari for example, which was a curse for the farmer and brought inhuman treatment to the landless peasant. Though it was abolished by law soon after India became an independent nation and the 'land-to-the-tiller' resolution was passed, for several years after that it remained an Act on paper alone. Today, several decades later, can we honestly say that we have seen a substantial improvement in the lives of poor Indian farmers?

The curse of bonded labour still persists in many parts of India. In '*Sawa Ser Gehoon*' Premchand elaborates on their misery. He shows us how an honest, god-fearing farmer finally becomes a bonded labourer on his own land.

Then there is the caste problem. In the story '*Thakur Ka Kuan*', the single well for the lower caste of people (chamaars) in the village has been polluted. Jokhu is sick and his wife struggles to get just one pitcher of clean water. The Thakur has placed guards around his well, and the one in the mandir is unapproachable for the lower castes. Her encounter with the 'pujari' is very crudely described, but Premchand hits the nail on the head, and spares us sophistry in the name of subtlety. She fails and Jokhu drinks the polluted poisonous water. Nothing had changed at the time of writing the story and for several years after that. Today, more time has passed. Who among us can say that these incidents do not happen in this free India that we live in?

Premchand's relevance became all the more important to me as I continued to mature as a reader. I realized he was one of the very few writers of Urdu and Hindi in the early twentieth century who wrote stories about the downtrodden and oppressed; those who form the bulk of our people. His protagonists were chamaars, kisans, and the corrupt Brahmins. Most other writers were busy writing either escapist romantic fiction or the increasingly slogan-ridden stories relevant to the nationalist movement for independence, which was gaining momentum in the country. Premchand's

stories and his complete and natural empathy with characters like Hori and Dhanias in his classic *Gaban* made them come alive for his readers.

Although he may not be known for a great show of craftsmanship, his portraits of ordinary rural people are brilliant. So detailed are his nuances of village life that he does not forget to describe even the caste and pedigree of cows and bulls and buffaloes. Not once does he use the names of months from the English calendar. It is always Chait, Baisakh, Phagun etc, as they are referred to in villages. His language, though not purely of the peasants, is not pure Hindi or Urdu either. It is the right blend of Urdu and Hindi and also our rural dialect. It is truly the language of the common man, and Hindustani in its full essence. Today it may sound a little difficult because of its leaning towards the Urdu idiom, but that was the spoken language in his times. Yet despite the changing times, his language still remains the role model for the most accessible form of Hindustani, the language of the common man.

Meanwhile, two decades later, I had another encounter with Munshi Premchand. I decided to picturize his works for an audio-visual medium. I realized once again, in spite of many a conflict with him, Munshi Premchand had remained with me through the years. I started reading him again.

This time I found some new stories which are rarely mentioned by the critics. In fact I was surprised that I had not come across them earlier either, despite having followed his writing for so many years. I also began to form new impressions after reading some old stories again.

I began to wonder again at this quality in Munshi Premchand which made the reader respond in different ways at different times in his own life. This does not mean of course that I denied my earlier impressions, but perhaps some things hit with greater force. '*Kafan*', for example. The climax of '*Kafan*' is the most profound statement on poverty and against the society which fosters it.

Ghisu and Madhav are a father and son duo from the lower caste. The most striking feature about their character is the fact that they are immune to their own poverty. They beg, but are not professional beggars. They want work, but are too lethargic to work. They indulge in petty thefts and are unmoved by their own deprivation. When Ghisu's pregnant wife dies without food and medicine, with a child in her womb, they set out to beg so that they can give her a funeral. Later they change their mind and have a

feast instead. Ghisu rationalizes his act by saying that society will take care of the funeral, since it is society which has caused her untimely death.

‘*Poos Ki Raat*’ is another story that may have been written by the master Russian storyteller Chekov, who incidentally was Munshi Premchand’s contemporary. It deals with just one character, one mood, one situation and yet it lays bare the sheer burden of poverty with very little fuss or grand statements. In my third encounter with Munshi Premchand I was also struck by the visuals he was able to provide to me. ‘*Thakur Ka Kuan*’ and ‘*Namak Ka Darogha*’ are a visual treat for any filmmaker. So is ‘*Bade Bhai Saheb*’ and ‘*Kafan*’.

And finally there is a beautiful, restful and effortless communal harmony invoked by his characters and the worlds they occupy. It would never even occur to a reader to wonder about the communities or religious identities of his characters. Moreover, it is not an academic or assumed secularism. It is simply a part of the world he describes in a way that defies further probing. ‘*Panch Parmeshwar*’ is one such story. One longs for that kind of society even today. Premchand himself was an example of an unselfconscious and perfectly secular mind. The kind that has become very rare today.

December 2006 Gulzar

A Winter's Night

Halku came up to Munni and said, 'The landlord has come again. I will have to give him the money you had kept aside for a rainy day. There is no other way of getting rid of him.'

Munni was sweeping the floor. She turned around and said, 'We have just those three rupees. If you give him two, how will we buy the blanket? Without a blanket, how will you sleep out in the field in the cold winter night? Tell him, we shall pay him after the harvest, not now.'

Halku stood still, undecided for a moment. What his wife said was true. Winter was setting in. He couldn't possibly keep watch over his crop in the chilly nights without a warm covering. At the same time, the landlord was not going to agree; he would threaten and abuse. It seemed simpler to shiver through the winter nights than listen to the landlord rant endlessly. Halku (an inappropriate name, meaning 'light', for someone so huge) stepped closer to his wife and tried persuading her, 'Give me that money or he will never go away. We shall think of some other way of getting that blanket.'

Munni looked at him angrily. 'That will be the day! Let me hear which other way you have thought of for getting that blanket? Is anyone likely to gift us one? We have been paying off this debt for years—god knows how many instalments are still left! I keep telling you, why don't you leave tenant farming? You work so hard in the fields, yet the money the crop brings in goes into paying back the interest on the loan. Where does that leave you? You still have the debt amount to pay off! Were you born to simply pay off old debts? You can earn enough to fill your stomach if you take up work as a casual labourer. I tell you, there is nothing for you in farming. I won't give you that money, I won't.'

Halku listened to her in silence, then asked sadly, 'Do you want me to listen to his abuses?'

Munni asked angrily, 'Why would he abuse us? Is he our lord and master?'

But no sooner had she spoken these words that the anger left her. The bitter truth hidden in Halku's sad words hit her.

She took out the money. Placing it on Halku's open palm, she said, 'Leave farming after this harvest. If you work as a hired hand, at least you will earn enough to eat. We will have some peace from this constant fear. How I hate farming! It takes back everything you put into it, and on top of it all, you have to listen to abuses and insults.'

Halku took the money and went out feeling as though he had torn his heart out and was giving it away. How hard he had saved, paisa by paisa, to put together those three rupees to buy a blanket! Today, he was being forced to give it away. With every step, his shoulders bent under the weight of his helplessness.

II

It was a bitterly cold winter night. Even the stars seemed to shiver with the cold. At the edge of the field, under a shelter of sugar cane leaves, Halku lay shivering on a string cot, wrapped in an old piece of sack. Beside him lay his companion, Jabra the dog, with his head pressed into his stomach whimpering softly. Neither was able to sleep.

Halku dug his head deeper between his knees and asked, 'Feeling the cold, are you, Jabra? Didn't I tell you to stay home? Why did you come here? Now get chilled to the bone; there is nothing I can do. You thought I was coming here for a feast, didn't you? So you ran ahead and came here. Now whimper and whine all you want!'

Jabra wagged his tail, whimpered a little louder, yawned hugely and then became quiet. His canine mind had perhaps understood that his master could not sleep because of his whimpering.

Halku stroked Jabra's cold back and said, 'Don't come with me from tomorrow or you will be laid out cold yourself. The biting westerly wind comes laden with darts of ice at this time of the year. I will get up and fix myself another pipe of tobacco. I have smoked eight pipes already. Such are the joys of farming! And look at those blessed few who, even in the dead of winter, feel too warm for comfort. God forbid that they should feel the cold with their thick mattresses, blankets and woollens! Blame it on luck . . . one man works hard while another lives on the fruits of his harvest.'

Halku got up, dug out some live coals from the nearly dead fire and lit his pipe. Jabra too got to his feet.

Halku took a long puff and began speaking to his dog once again, 'The cold doesn't go away when you smoke; it is just that it takes your mind off the chill for a while.'

Jabra looked at him with love-filled eyes.

'Get through this night somehow. Tomorrow, I shall lay out some straw for you and you can sleep more comfortably.'

Jabra put his paws on Halku's knees and brought his face close to his master's. Halku could feel his warm breath in the cold air.

Halku finished his pipe and lay down once again. This time he was determined to ignore the cold and go to sleep. Within a minute, he could feel his heart pounding and his body getting chilled. He tossed and turned but the cold seemed to have grabbed his chest like some evil spirit and refused to let go.

When he could bear it no longer, he picked up Jabra, and patting him gently, put him to sleep in his lap. The dog smelt awful but, holding Jabra in his lap, Halku felt a sense of well being he hadn't known for a long time. Jabra probably thought he was in heaven, warm and loved by his master. Simple and loving Halku was not at all bothered by the smell coming out of the dog's body. He would have shown the same spontaneous affection to a friend or a brother. He no longer felt defeated by the back-breaking poverty that forced him to live this life. At this moment, it seemed as though his friendship with Jabra had opened all the doors of his mind and heart.

Suddenly, Jabra's ears pricked up at some sound. The sense of companionship with his master had filled him with a new alertness. He jumped to his feet and began to bark excitedly. Halku tried to get him back under the shelter, but he wouldn't get back. Instead, he began to run excitedly around the field. He would return to his master for a minute, then race off again. A strong sense of duty made him forget everything else.

III

An hour passed. Sharp gusts of wind increased the cold. Halku sat up. He put his head between his knees and clasped himself tightly. He felt frozen, as if his veins carried ice instead of blood. He peered into the sky to see how much was left of the night. The Great Bear had not climbed even half

way up the sky. Daylight would break when it reached exactly over his head. There were still many hours to go.

There was a mango orchard beside Halku's field. In winter, its ground was covered with dead, fallen leaves. Halku thought of going there, gathering the dry leaves to make a big fire and warming himself beside it. If someone were to see him gathering leaves at night, they would leave him alone thinking he was a ghost! And by now, he was too cold to be scared of any wild animals that might lie hidden in the fields.

Halku pulled some pulse stalks from a neighbouring field, made a broom and walked towards the mango grove holding a burning dung cake to show the way. Jabra ran towards him and started wagging his tail.

Halku said, 'I can't stand it any more, Jabra. Let's gather some leaves and start a fire. When we have warmed up nicely, we shall come back to our field and go to sleep. There is still a long way to go before dawn.'

Jabra let out a soft growl of agreement and ran ahead.

It was pitch dark in the mango orchard. In the darkness, the wind trampled mercilessly over the fallen leaves. Dew dripped from the tree trunks like falling tears.

Suddenly, a gust of wind carried the smell of henna flowers. Halku cried out, 'What a lovely smell, Jabra! Can you smell it, too?'

Jabra had found a bone lying on the ground and was far too busy licking it to answer.

Halku put the burning dung cake on the ground and began to gather dead leaves. His hands trembled, his bare feet felt numb but he went on making a heap of leaves. He wanted to burn the cold to ashes in the bonfire he was preparing.

Soon, he had a blazing fire going. Its flames rose higher and higher to lick the overhanging branches and leap away. In the flickering light of the leaping, dancing flames, the huge mango trees seemed to balance the black night on their tops. In that infinite ocean of darkness, the light from Halku's fire tossed and trembled like a small boat.

Halku sat warming himself before the fire. He took off his shawl and tucked it under his arm, then stretched his feet as though challenging the cold: Do the worst you can now! Having conquered the great power of the cold, he could not help but be pleased with himself.

He asked Jabra, 'So, Jabra, still feeling cold?'

Jabra barked softly as though to say, 'How can one feel cold now?'

‘I should have thought of this sooner; we need not have got chilled to the bone.’

Jabra wagged his tail in complete agreement.

‘Let’s try and jump over this fire. Let’s see who can do it. And if you get burnt, I have no medicine to give you.’

Jabra looked fearfully towards ‘the line of fire’.

‘Don’t tell Munni about this; she will make an awful fuss,’ saying this Halku leapt over the flames. Jabra walked around the fire and came to stand beside him. Halku teased him, saying, ‘Come on, come on, this won’t do. You have to jump over it!’ Once again, he leapt over the dancing flames and returned to the other side.

IV

The leaves had burnt out. Darkness fell over the orchard once again. Only a few embers were left beneath the bed of ash. The fire flickered briefly as a gust of wind swept over it, then died down again.

Halku wrapped himself in his shawl once again. Sitting snugly beside the fire, he began to hum softly under his breath. Warmth had returned to his body and he felt drowsy.

Suddenly, Jabra ran towards the field and began barking loudly. Halku sensed that a herd of wild animals had entered his field—perhaps a flock of antelopes. He could hear them thrashing about. They were eating up his crop—the sound of chomping carried clearly in the night air.

Halku said to himself, ‘As long as Jabra is there, no animal can enter my field. He will tear them to pieces. I am imagining things. There! I can’t hear a thing now. I am sure I was imagining things.’

He called out loudly, ‘Jabra! Jabra!’

Jabra kept barking furiously but did not come near Halku.

Once again, the sound of grazing and chomping could be heard. Now Halku could no longer fool himself. At the same time, he didn’t want to get up. He was so warm. To get up and chase the animals out of his field on this cold, misty night seemed unbearable. He didn’t move from his place.

Instead, he just called out loudly, ‘Jabra! Jabra!’

Jabra was still barking excitedly. The animals were still grazing loudly. The crop was ready in the field. It was a good crop this year, and these

animals were eating it all up.

Halku hardened his heart and rose to his feet. He took a few steps when, suddenly, a biting cold gust of wind, sharp as a scorpion's sting, sprang up and hit him. Halku went back to the burnt-out fire and began to warm his chilled body by blowing at the embers.

By now, Jabra was barking himself hoarse. The antelopes were doing a quick job of destroying the ripe crop. But Halku kept sitting peacefully beside the warm ash. Lethargy held him motionless, as though invisible ropes had pegged him down from all sides. Wrapped in his shawl, he went to sleep on the warm ground beside the burnt-out fire.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, warm sunlight was spread all around him and Munni was asking, 'Are you going to sleep all day? You came here to get a good night's sleep and out there, the entire field has been destroyed.'

Halku got to his feet and asked, 'Have you been to the field?'

'Yes, the crop is ruined. I have never heard of anyone sleeping the way you do. What was the use of your staying up to keep watch?'

Halku tried to make an excuse, 'I nearly died last night and you are going on about the crop. I can't tell you what a terrible stomach ache I had!'

They began to walk towards the field. The ready crop was trampled and Jabra was lying still on his back beneath the shelter of sugar cane leaves, seemingly lifeless.

Both looked at the state of the field. Munni's face showed sadness, but Halku looked happy.

Munni spoke worriedly, 'Now you will have to work as a hired hand to pay the rent.'

Halku answered with a beaming smile, 'At least I won't have to sleep out on cold nights any more.'

The Salt Inspector

When the new Department for Salt was created and the sale of this god-given substance was banned, the business of selling and buying salt began to be done on the sly. Several illegal practices were begun. Some resorted to bribes, others to clever dealings. Government officials made a lot of money. People from other departments wanted to join this department, regardless of whatever high position they already occupied in their own departments. Even lawyers were tempted to become salt inspectors.

This was the time when people thought English education and the Christian religion went hand in hand. Persian was much in favour. Those Indians who had read Persian romances and epics could reach some of the highest offices. Munshi Vanshidhar was one such person who, having read the tale of Zuleikha's separation from her beloved and the love story of Shireen–Farhad, set out in search of employment.

His father was an experienced man of the world. He tried to explain things to his son, 'You can see the state of affairs in our home. We are groaning under debt. Your sisters are getting big and tall like wild grass. I am like a tree that is about to fall over at any time. Now you are the master of this house. Don't give any thought to the position of employment; that is like the grave of a saint. Keep your eyes on the offerings and gifts. Look for a job where there is enough extra money to be made. The monthly salary is like the full moon which you can see one day and from the very next day it begins to lessen till it finally disappears. Extra income is like a perennial stream that will never let you go thirsty. Salaries are given by men; that is why they seldom increase. Extra income is god-given; that is why there is so much of it. What else can I say to you; you are a learned man. Remember, these things require intelligence. Learn to study human beings, understand their needs and look out for the right opportunity and only then do what you consider appropriate. If you are strict with the man who is in trouble you will make profit. But it is difficult to extract money out of

someone who doesn't need your help. Remember my words; they are the sum total of my life's earnings.'

The father finished his lecture and gave his blessings. Vanshidhar was a dutiful son. He listened carefully to his father and left the house. In the big, wide world he had Patience as his friend, Intelligence to show him the way and Confidence as his helper. He must have left home on an auspicious moment for he was immediately appointed as an inspector in the Salt Department. The salary was good and the sky was the limit for extra income. When his elderly father heard the good news, his happiness knew no bounds. The moneylender's attitude softened towards the family. Hope sprang afresh. Thorns of envy pierced the neighbours' hearts.

II

It was a winter's night. The staff and watchmen of the Salt Department were drunk. It had been barely six months since Munshi Vanshidhar had been posted here, but even in this short time he had impressed his seniors with his efficiency and perfect manners. The officers trusted him.

The Yamuna river flowed about a mile away from the Salt Office. A bridge of boats was made over it. Vanshidhar was fast asleep when suddenly he heard the sound of carts crossing the boat bridge and the shouts of boatmen. Why would carts be crossing the river at this hour of the night, he wondered. Surely, something is amiss. He put on his uniform, put his pistol in his pocket, mounted his horse and within minutes reached the riverside. He saw a long line of bullock-carts crossing the bridge. He shouted, 'Whose carts are these?'

There was a minute's silence. There was some whispering among the men. One man in the front spoke up, 'They belong to Pandit Alopideen.'

'Who is he?'

'He is from Dataganj.'

Munshi Vanshidhar was surprised. Pandit Alopideen was among the most respected zamindars of this area. He dealt in lakhs of rupees. From the lowest to the mightiest, there was no one in this area who was not indebted to him in one way or the other. He did a variety of businesses and was considered quite a clever person. English officers visited his estate for

hunting and enjoyed his hospitality. There were parties and feasting at his home for twelve months in a year.

Vanshidhar asked, 'Where are the carts going?' The answer was, 'Kanpur'. But when he asked what was loaded in them, he was met with complete silence. Vanshidhar's suspicion now became firm. He waited for an answer, then shouted, 'Have all of you become deaf? I am asking you: What is loaded in these carts?'

When there was still no answer, he took his horse close to one of the carts and poked his finger in a sack. Now there was no room for suspicion. The sack had lumps of salt crystals.

III

Half-awake half-asleep, Pandit Alopideen was riding his beautifully decorated chariot. Suddenly, a couple of nervous-looking cart-drivers came running up to him and woke him up. They said, 'Master, the inspector has stopped our carts. He is standing by the riverside and calling you.'

Panditji was a firm believer in the Goddess Lakshmi. He used to say that forget this world, even in heaven it is Lakshmi who reigns supreme. Perhaps he was right. Justice and government are mere toys in the hands of Lakshmi; she can move them around as she chooses. Panditji spoke arrogantly from his reclining position on the chariot, 'I am coming.' Unhurriedly, he folded a paan for himself. Wrapped in a warm quilt, he went up to the inspector and said, 'God bless you, Babuji! Have I committed a crime that my carts have been stopped like this? You should be kindly disposed at least towards us Brahmins.'

Vanshidhar spoke drily, 'Government orders!'

Pandit Alopideen laughed and said, 'I don't know the government or its orders. You are my government. Between us, it is like a family matter. Are you and I outsiders for each other? You need not have taken the trouble of coming here. It can't be that I pass this way and forget to make an offering to the god of this ghat. I was, in any case, about to come and meet you myself.'

These sweet words had no effect on Vanshidhar. Riding the wave of honesty was still a new experience for him. He spoke harshly, 'I am not one of those dishonest types who sell their soul for a little money. You are under

arrest. You will have to follow the law. I have no more time for idle talk. Jamadar Badlusingh, I order you to arrest him.'

Pandit Alopideen stood like a statue. Panic spread among the crowd of cart-drivers. For the first time in his life, Panditji had had to hear such harsh words. Badlusingh stepped forward, but he could not dare hold Panditji by the hand. Panditji had never seen Duty show such disrespect towards Wealth. He told himself that the inspector was young and inexperienced. He didn't know the value of money. With great humility, he said, 'Don't do this, Babu saheb, I will be destroyed. My reputation will be dragged through mud. And what will you gain by humiliating me? We are not outsiders for each other.'

Vanshidhar spoke in a harsh voice, 'I don't wish to listen to such things.'

The support that Alopideen had taken for a rock seemed to slip from under him. His self-respect and his sense of superiority were shaken. But he still had faith in the power of money. He addressed his manager, 'Present Babu saheb with a thousand rupees; he is like a hungry lion right now.'

Vanshidhar spoke angrily, 'Forget one thousand, even one lakh rupees cannot make me step away from the right path.'

Such senseless obstinacy and sacrifice for the sake of Duty annoyed Alopideen. The two powers now stood face to face. Money began to jump higher and higher to attack Duty. From one thousand, the sum was raised to five, ten, fifteen and finally twenty thousand rupees but Duty displayed godlike bravery in the face of this army of thousands and stood unshakeable like a mountain.

Till, finally, Alopideen spoke despairingly, 'No more! I can offer you no more. You can do whatever you wish.'

Vanshidhar once again called out to his Jamadar. Silently cursing the inspector, Badlusingh moved towards Pandit Alopideen. Panditji nervously took a few steps backwards. With utmost humility he said, 'Babu saheb, for god's sake have mercy on me! I am willing to make a deal for twenty-five thousand rupees.'

'It is impossible!'

'For thirty thousand?'

'No, never!'

'Not even for forty thousand?'

'Not forty thousand, not even forty lakh! Badlusingh, arrest this man. I don't wish to hear another word.'

Duty crushed Wealth under its feet. Alopideen saw a big-built man coming towards him with handcuffs. He looked all around him with hopeless eyes. Then he fainted and fell to the ground.

IV

The world slept but its tongue was awake and wagging. By the morning, young and old alike spoke only of this. Everyone had something to say about Panditji. Everyone was busy heaping abuses at him as though, with his arrest, crime had been removed from society. The milkman who sold water instead of milk, the officials who filled out false account books, the clerks who travelled without tickets, the merchants who did business with false papers—they were all behaving as though they were superior, god-like beings. The next day when a handcuffed Pandit Alopideen—his heart filled with regret and sadness, his head bent with shame—reached the courts, the entire city rushed to the spot. Seldom had such an eager crowd shown up for fairs or even festivals! People pushed their way into the courtroom in such large numbers that you couldn't tell where the walls ended and the roof began.

But once inside the courtroom, it was a different matter. Pandit Alopideen was the lion king of this vast jungle. Here, court officials were his devout followers, clerks his humble servants, lawyers his obedient slaves and the lower-level peons, orderlies etc. in his pocket. People ran from all directions upon seeing him inside the courtroom. They were surprised not by what he had done but by the fact that he had got caught by the law. How can such a man—who has the money to solve all his problems and a glib tongue to get him out of any tricky situation—get caught like this? Everyone walked up to him to express their sympathy. An army of lawyers was selected with great care. The battle lines between Duty and Wealth were drawn up in the battlefield of Law. Vanshidhar stood quietly. Truth was his only strength and clear speech his only weapon. There were witnesses, but clearly wobbling under the influence of greed.

Vanshidhar could sense that the law would not be fair to him. This was a court of law, but its officials were under the influence of prejudice. What do law and prejudice have in common? Nothing. The case was immediately

dismissed. The Deputy Magistrate wrote in his order: 'The proofs presented against Pandit Alopideen are baseless and false. He is a great man. It is beyond one's imagination that a man like him would do any such thing for small, petty profit. Although it is not fully Inspector Vanshidhar's fault either, it is a matter of regret that his thoughtlessness and arrogance have put a good man to so much trouble. While we are happy that he is so conscientious about his work, the corruption in the Salt Department has made him act in this thoughtless way. He needs to be more careful in future.'

The lawyers heard the verdict and jumped with joy. A smiling Alopideen came out of the court. His well-wishers had thrown money about. A sea of generosity had sprung up. Its waves had shaken the foundations of justice. When Vanshidhar stepped out of the court, he was met with a rain of sarcasm. The peons bent low in mock obedience. But at this moment, every cruel word, every unkind gesture simply fed the fire of pride burning inside him. Had he won the case, he might not have walked with such pride as he displayed now. Today he could sense something sadly lacking in the world around him. Law and learning, the grand-sounding titles, the long beards, the flowing robes—nothing seemed fit to deserve true respect.

Vanshidhar had taken up the fight against Wealth; it was necessary that he pay the price for it. In less than a week, his suspension orders arrived. He was punished for following his duty. Heartbroken, overcome with sadness and regret, he returned home. His father had been grumbling for days: 'Despite all the lectures he has not paid heed. In my old age, I have to listen to the grocer and the moneylender while he wants to live only on his salary and refuses extra income. After all, I also worked. I didn't occupy a high position, but I worked and did my best. Look at him—he wants to be honest! It's a case of wanting to light a lamp in the mosque when there is darkness at home! I pity such thinking. What a waste of all that study and learning!'

When Vanshidhar was suspended and returned home, the poor old father was, at first, regretful at the loss of his son's job. Then he said so many harsh things that had Vanshidhar not removed himself from the spot, his anger would have known no bounds. His mother was sad too. Her dream of going on pilgrimage to Jagannath and Rameshwar now lay shattered.

A week passed. It was evening. Vanshidhar's father sat counting the Lord's name on his beads when a gaily decorated chariot stopped at their

door. It had green and pink curtains and a pair of handsome bullocks with copper-coated horns pulling it. Several servants with stout sticks on their shoulders accompanied it. Pandit Alopideen alighted and stood in the doorway. Vanshidhar's father ran to greet him, bending low and talking sweetly all the while. 'It is our great good fortune that you have come to our home. We are so ashamed that we cannot even look up at you. What are we to do? We are unfortunate in having this good-for-nothing son. God should have left us childless instead of giving us such a son.'

Alopideen said, 'No, no, brother, don't say such things.'

Munshi ji expressed surprise, 'What else can I say about such a son?'

Alopideen spoke in loving tones, 'There are so many righteous people in the world who have sacrificed everything for the sake of bringing a good name to their family.'

Then Pandit Alopideen addressed Vanshidhar, 'Please don't take my words for flattery. I need not take all this trouble just to please you. That night you had taken me under arrest because you had the right to do so; today I have come to you of my own free will. I have seen thousands of wealthy people and have dealt with many officials. I managed to turn them all into my slaves. But you are the only person who has defeated me. Allow me to make a humble request.'

Vanshidhar had got up to greet Alopideen the moment he had seen him approaching, but his gesture had been marked with dignity. He thought Alopideen had come to taunt and mock him. He had made no attempt at offering an apology. He found his father's fawning hard to tolerate. He glanced quickly in Panditji's direction and found goodwill written all over his face. Pride was replaced by embarrassment and made Vanshidhar bow his head. A little shyly, he said, 'It is your generosity that makes you say this. I apologise for my brashness and bad manners. I was chained by my sense of duty, or else I am your slave. Your wish is my command.'

Alopideen spoke with humility, 'At the riverbank that night you wouldn't listen to my request, but today you must.'

Vanshidhar said, 'I can be of no use to you now, but whatever I can do for you, I promise to do wholeheartedly.'

Alopideen took out a stamped paper and put it before Vanshidhar. 'Please accept this post and sign on this document. I am a Brahmin, and till you fulfil my request I shall not move from your doorstep.'

Munshi Vanshidhar read the paper and his eyes filled up with tears of gratitude. Pandit Alopideen had appointed him as permanent manager of all his properties. An annual salary of six thousand rupees, a daily allowance, a horse to ride on, a bungalow to live in, and plenty of servants at no extra cost! Moved, Vanshidhar spoke in a trembling voice, 'Panditji, I don't have the ability to sufficiently praise your generosity. But I am not fit to occupy such a high post.'

Alopideen laughed and said, 'At this moment I need an unfit person like you!'

Vanshidhar spoke in a serious tone now, 'I am your devoted servant. It would be my great good fortune to serve a well-known, well-regarded person such as you. But I have neither intelligence, learning nor the temperament that make up for my shortcomings. For such an important post you need an experienced person.'

Alopideen took a pen out of a pen-stand and handed it to Vanshidhar saying, 'I need neither bookish learning, nor experience, nor efficiency. I have seen enough proof of the importance of these qualities. Now by a stroke of good fortune and good timing, I have come across that pearl in front of which ability and learning fades. Take this pen and without any further ado, sign on this document. My only prayer to the Almighty God is that may you always remain that dry, brash, harsh but disciplined and high-minded inspector that I saw beside the river.'

Vanshidhar's eyes became wet with tears. His heart could not contain the kindness shown by Alopideen. He looked once again towards Panditji with respect and admiration. Then, with a trembling hand, he signed on the document.

A delighted Alopideen embraced Vanshidhar.

3

Kaki

It is said that old age marks a return to childhood. In the case of the elderly Kaki, there was nothing to look forward to except the next meal, and no other means of drawing attention to her troubles except crying. She could neither hear nor walk. She would simply lie on the ground and cry if someone in the family did something to displease her, or her food was given to her either late or not enough for her needs, or someone bought something to eat from the market and failed to share it with her. Her crying was no ordinary crying; she would wail loudly and persistently like a baby.

Her husband had died a long time ago. Her sons too had died. Now she had no one except a nephew to whom she had signed away all her property. At that time, the nephew had made all sorts of promises, but those promises had turned out to be nothing but empty words. Even though her property brought an annual income of about 150–200 rupees, poor Kaki was barely given enough to fill her stomach. It is not easy to decide whether the fault lay with the nephew, Pandit Budhiram, or his wife, Rupa. Budhiram was a good-natured man but only as long as there was no danger to his money. Rupa was a strict but god-fearing woman. And so, Kaki never disliked Rupa's harshness as much as she did Budhiram's seeming goodness.

Sometimes Budhiram regretted his bad treatment of Kaki. He knew it was her wealth that allowed him to live like a gentleman. If mere words could do anything to help Kaki, he would have had no problem in making empty gestures, but the thought of having to take any real trouble on her behalf made him bury his good thoughts. So much so, that if he had guests in the house and Kaki happened to start crying and wailing, he would scold her bitterly. Boys tend to be cruel to old people, and especially when they see their parents being unkind to elders they take great pleasure in troubling the elderly. One of Budhiram's boys would pinch her and run away, another would spit water at her. At such times, Kaki would scream loudly and start crying. But everyone knew that she kept her special sort of crying only for food. So no one gave any attention to her suffering. It was only when Kaki

got very angry and started swearing and cursing the boys would Rupa come to the scene. Kaki seldom used her tongue. Little did she know that her words were far more effective than her tears.

In the entire world, if there was anyone that Kaki loved, it was Budhiram's younger daughter, Ladli. Scared that her brothers would snatch away her sweets and snacks, Ladli would sit beside Kaki to enjoy her treats. Kaki would beg her to share some of the sweets and Ladli, hiding from her brothers, would always agree.

II

It was night. The flute-players were playing their flutes at Budhiram's door and an eager crowd of boys stood about enjoying the music. Guests were relaxing on charpoys. The village barbers were giving them massages. A *bhaat* stood nearby reciting an epic poem and looking as though he and not the original poet deserved the applause from the guests. The few educated young men in that crowd stood about looking bored. Being English-educated, they considered it beneath their dignity to be a part of this village gathering.

It was the engagement ceremony of Budhiram's elder son, Mukhram. Inside the house, women were singing auspicious songs and Rupa was busy making preparations for the guests. Food was being cooked over large fires. In one pan, puri and kachori were being fried, in another more delicacies. Spicy vegetables were being cooked in another large pot. The smell of ghee and spices was all over the place.

Kaki sat in her small cell-like room. The smell of freshly cooked tasty food was making her restless. She was thinking, 'Perhaps there won't be any puris left for me. It's so late and no one has come to give me my dinner. It looks like everyone has eaten. Nothing has been left for me.' The thought made her want to cry but fear that it would be seen as inauspicious on such an occasion made her control her tears.

'Aah! What a fragrance! But no one shall bother about me. When they barely give me enough to eat on ordinary days, why will they bother to feed me puris?' Again, the tears welled up. Again, she controlled them. Fear of Rupa's scolding made her stay quiet.

For a long time, Kaki was lost in her sad thoughts. The delicious fragrance was making her mouth water. The imagined taste of those puris filled her with delight. Oh, who could she call out for? Even Ladli hadn't come to see her today. The boys who tormented her every day were not to be seen. If only someone were to show up, she would ask the names of the dishes that were being cooked.

The picture of those puris began to dance in her imagination. Surely, they must be soft, puffed, perfectly round and nicely done to an almost-red colour. Rupa must have fed her guests well. The kachoris must be smelling of spices and cardamom. If only she could get even one puri; she would hold it in her hand and see for herself. Why not go and sit beside the fire, she decided. The puris must have been just taken out of the oil. They would be placed on trays while still hot and steaming. After all, we can smell the flowers inside the house but going to a garden to smell them fresh is an altogether different experience. Having made up her mind, she got up on her haunches and with the help of her hands, got down a couple of steps and crawled all the way to where the food was being cooked. Once there, she experienced the same patience that a hungry dog feels when he sits facing someone who is eating.

At that moment, Rupa was buried under work. She was running from one room to another. She would go to check on the food, then run to get something or the other from her store. Someone came running and said, 'The guests are asking for *thandai*.' She ran to fetch the *thandai*. Another person came and said, 'The *bhaat* has come; give him something to eat.' She began taking out food for the *bhaat* when a third person came and said, 'Will it take long for the food to be ready? If so, why don't you get us the musical instruments? Let's have some music till then.'

The poor woman was managing on her own. All that running around had made her tired, irritable, even angry but she didn't have the time or occasion to express her anger. She was scared that the neighbourhood women would taunt her for losing her cool so easily. Her throat was parched with thirst. The heat was making things worse. Yet, she didn't have a moment's respite to either take a sip of water or fan herself with a hand-fan. There was also the fear that the servants would start stealing if she slackened the least bit. In these circumstances, the moment she saw Kaki sitting beside the fire, she blew a fuse! She could now no longer contain her anger. She didn't even stop to think what the neighbourhood women would

say, or what the men sitting outside would make of it. She jumped on Kaki the way a frog pounces on an earthworm. Holding her with both hands, she screamed, 'I have never seen an appetite like yours. Do you have a stomach or a raging fire inside you? Why couldn't you have stayed in your room? The guests haven't eaten yet, the gods haven't been offered *bhog*, but you don't have the patience to wait your turn. Must you come here and sit in the middle of everything? May you burn your tongue one day! You eat all day long yet there is no satisfying you. People say we don't give you enough to eat and that is why you go around with your tongue lolling out all day long. The witch doesn't ever die or leave us alone! She is bent on getting us a bad name. What will people think! She eats so much, yet no one knows where it goes. If you know what is good for you, go and sit quietly in your room. When the guests have eaten and the family starts to eat, you too shall be given your food. You aren't exactly a goddess that you must be served before everyone else.'

Kaki did not raise her head. She neither cried nor uttered a word. She quietly crawled her way back to her room. Every one of poor Kaki's mental and physical abilities was drawn only towards Rupa's harsh voice. There was no room for anything else or any other thought. When a tree growing beside a riverbank falls into the river, water rushes from all sides to cover that spot.

III

The food was ready. Leaf-plates were laid out and the guests began to eat. The women began to sing wedding songs. The barbers and servants accompanying the guests were also served, but they sat some distance away. Good manners dictated that no one could get up and leave till everyone had finished eating. A few guests, who were a little educated, were irritated at the servants taking so long to finish. They were fretting over this needless delay.

Filled with regret, Kaki sat in her room. She felt no anger towards Rupa; she was saddened by her own hastiness. 'Rupa was right: family is served only after all the guests have eaten. Why couldn't I have waited? Such

humiliation in front of everyone! Now I shall not go, not till someone comes to get me.'

And so she waited for the call. But the fragrance of ghee was testing her patience. Every minute seemed like an age. She imagined every detail of the scene unfolding downstairs: The leaf-plates would have been laid out by now. The guests would have come. They would be washing their hands and feet. The barbers would be pouring water for them. People would have sat down to eat. She could hear the women sing. To keep herself occupied, she too lay down for a while and began to hum the words of the songs being sung below. She felt she had been singing for a long time. Surely, the guests wouldn't be eating for so long. There was no sound to be heard. They must have eaten and gone by now, she thought. No one has come to call me. Rupa is angry; she might not call me at all. Or, perhaps, she thinks that I should come on my own; after all, I am not a guest that I need to be invited.

Kaki prepared herself to crawl. The very thought that in the next couple of minutes the spicy vegetables and puris would be in her hands excited her. She began making all sorts of grand plans: First, I shall eat the puris with the vegetables, then with curds and sugar. The kachori would go so well with the raita. Let people think what they want, I shall keep asking for extra helpings. What will people say? That I don't have any manners? Let them. After all, I am going to get puris to eat after so long. I am not going to get up after barely tasting them just for the sake of good manners.

She sat on her haunches and, crawling with the help of her hands, she reached the courtyard. But what bad luck! As always, Hope had misjudged Time. The guests were still seated. Those who had finished eating sat about licking their fingers. Some looked about to check whether others were still eating or not. Some worried that the few puris still left on their leaf-plates would go waste if they were somehow not gobbled up. Some licked their lips after finishing off the curds but hesitated to ask for more. While all this was going on, Kaki crawled her way bang into the middle of it all. Several men jumped out of her way in surprise. Someone called out, 'Who is this old woman? Where has she sprung up from? Watch out! She might touch someone!'

Pandit Budhiram flew into a rage at the very sight of Kaki. He had been standing holding a tray of puris. He dumped the tray on the ground and pounced on Kaki the way a cruel moneylender jumps on a dishonest creditor who might run away if not caught by the throat. He grabbed Kaki

with both hands, dragged her to her room and dumped her with a loud thump.

The guests finished eating. Then the family ate. After that came the turn of the musicians, the washermen, the other assorted servants and poor people from the village, but no one asked for Kaki. Budhiram and Rupa had decided to punish Kaki for her shamelessness. They had no pity for her old age, her pitiable condition and her near-loss of all senses. Only Ladli was thinking of her and worrying.

Ladli loved Kaki. She was a simple girl with none of the naughtiness and mischief that children usually have. She had felt awful both times when her parents had dragged Kaki cruelly away. She had wondered why they simply didn't give Kaki a lot of puris to eat. After all, the guests couldn't eat all of them. And what was wrong if Kaki ate before the guests did? She wanted to go to Kaki and make her feel better but fear of her mother held her back. She hadn't even touched her share of the puris; she had locked them away in her box of toys. She was impatient to take those puris to Kaki. She knew Kaki would sit up the moment she heard her and would be delighted by the puris. And then she would kiss and hug Ladli.

IV

It was eleven at night. Rupa lay fast asleep in the courtyard. But Ladli lay awake. She couldn't sleep without giving Kaki puris to eat. Her box of toys lay before her. When she was convinced that her mother was fast asleep, she got up quietly and began to think how to slip away. It was pitch dark all around. The only light was the soft glimmer from the halfdead cooking fires. A dog lay asleep before the fires. Ladli's eyes fell on the neem tree planted beside the main gate. She imagined that she could see Hanumanji sitting on top of it. She could clearly make out his long tail and the club in his hand. She closed her eyes in fright. Suddenly, the dog got up. Ladli felt a little reassured. The waking dog gave her more confidence than several sleeping people. She picked up the box in which she had locked away her puris and walked towards Kaki's room.

Poor Kaki could only remember someone dragging her by the hands, pulling her as though she was flying through air, and then dumping her from the top of a mountain. After that, she had fallen down unconscious.

When she regained consciousness, she could hear nothing. She imagined that people had eaten and gone to sleep and with that her fate too had gone to sleep! How was she to spend the night? There was a fire raging in her stomach. No one had bothered to check on her or give her something to eat. 'Will they become rich by starving me?' she wondered. 'Do they have no pity? They know I am old, deaf, blind and crippled. I know nothing. I understand nothing. So what if I went into the courtyard? Couldn't Budhiram have told me gently to come later—after the guests had eaten? Why did he have to drag and dump me? Rupa abused and insulted me in front of everyone for the sake of a few puris. And still their cruelty shows no signs of lessening. They have fed everyone but they have not bothered to even ask me. If they didn't feed me when they were feeding everyone else, surely they are not going to give me any puris now.'

And with that hopeless thought, Kaki lay down. Grief nearly choked her but the thought of the guests nearby made her stop herself from crying out loud.

Suddenly, she heard someone say, 'Get up, Kaki. I have brought puris for you.' Kaki recognized Ladli's voice. She got up instantly. She felt Ladli with both her hands and pulled her in her lap. Ladli took the puris from the box and gave them to Kaki.

Kaki asked, 'Has your mother given them?'

Ladli said, 'No, they are my share.'

Kaki pounced on them. The box of puris emptied within five minutes. Ladli asked, 'Have you eaten your fill, Kaki?'

Just as a little rain, instead of cooling, causes more heat these few puris merely increased Kaki's appetite. She said, 'No, child. Go and get some more from your mother.'

Ladli answered, 'Amma is sleeping; she will beat me if I wake her up.'

Kaki felt the inside of the toy box with her fingers. There were a few crumbs inside; she picked them up and ate them. She licked her lips several times, loudly and persistently.

She desperately wanted to eat more puris. When the dam of control bursts, the waves of desire become threateningly large. Kaki's unsatisfied heart was swept away in the current of her appetite. She lost the ability to tell proper from improper. She tried to control herself, but then she gave up and told Ladli, 'Hold my hand and take me where the guests had eaten.'

Ladli didn't understand what Kaki meant to do. She took Kaki's hand and made her sit beside a heap of used leaf-plates. The poor, old, senseless woman began to pick morsels of half-eaten food from the plates and eat them. Aah, the curd tasted so sweet! The kachoris were so delicious, so soft and crumbly! Despite being nearly senile, Kaki knew that she was doing something she ought not to. She knew she was licking the plates from which others had eaten. But old age is the last stage of the march of desires—when all desires collect into just one appetite. In Kaki's case, it was appetite for food.

At that very moment Rupa happened to wake up. She felt for Ladli and found her missing from her side. Alarmed, she got up from the bed and began to look all around. She rose from the bed and spotted Ladli standing beside a heap of used leaf-plates. Beside her, Kaki was picking morsels of half-eaten food and stuffing them in her mouth. Rupa was shocked and horrified. She would have felt the same had she seen a cow being slaughtered. In front of her eyes, a Brahmin woman was eating the leftovers from other people's used leaf-plates! She could not imagine a more shocking and sad scene. Her husband's aunt was doing something so low and so horrible for the sake of a few morsels of food. This was a sight that could make the viewer tremble with horror. She felt as though the earth had stopped spinning on its axis and the sky was going to fall. Something terrible was waiting to happen. Rupa felt no anger. How could anger come close to such sorrow? Fear and pity made tears well up in her eyes. Who was responsible for this great crime? With a pure heart filled with real sorrow, she raised her hands towards heaven and begged, 'Parmatma, have pity on my children. Do not punish me for this great wrong that I have done, or else I will be ruined.'

Rupa had never seen her selfishness and cruelty reflected so clearly before her eyes. She began to think, 'Hai! I have been so cruel! I have made the woman whose property fetches me an annual income of 200 rupees suffer so badly! I have been so terribly wrong. May god forgive me! It was my son's engagement today. I fed thousands of people. I ran around

fulfilling everyone's demands. I have spent thousands of rupees for the sake of keeping up my name and place in society, but I failed to feed the woman because of whom I was able to spend all those thousands of rupees. And why? Because she is old and helpless.'

Rupa lit a lamp, went inside her store, filled a tray with the different types of foods that had been prepared and came to Kaki.

Half the night had slipped away. Stars were scattered across the sky and sitting atop them, the gods were enjoying their divine meal, but none of them could have had greater pleasure than the sight of the tray laden with food Rupa gave to Kaki. Rupa spoke in a tearful voice, 'Get up, Kaki, and eat your dinner. I have committed a great wrong today. Please forgive me. Pray that I am not punished for it.'

Like an innocent child who forgets the beatings and the scoldings when it is handed a sweet, Kaki too forgot everything and sat down to eat. She gave blessings and good wishes from every pore of her body and Rupa sat in front of her enjoying this heavenly sight.

The Tale of Two Oxen

The donkey is considered the stupidest animal. When we want to tell someone that he is totally lacking in intelligence, we call him a ‘donkey’. It is difficult to tell whether the donkey is truly without intelligence or whether its simplicity, patience and harmlessness have made it seem so. Cows can use their horns as weapons; those who have newly born calves can become as ferocious as lionesses. A dog is usually a harmless animal, but it too can sometimes get angry. But no one has ever heard of a donkey getting angry. You may hit the poor creature as much as you want. You can throw the most awful, rotten hay before it, but you will never see it looking dissatisfied. Sometimes, in the month of Baisakh, it might bray loudly. But I have never seen it looking particularly happy. A permanent sadness seems to be a constant feature of his appearance. I have never seen his expression change in good times or bad times, in times of profit or of loss. The traits that are usually found in saints are found in the highest degree in a donkey. Yet men call him stupid.

The donkey has a younger brother, and that is the ox. We tend to use the word ‘ox’ in the same way that we use the word ‘donkey’. Some people regard the ox as the biggest among fools, but I don’t agree. The ox can gore you with his horns, and sometimes he can be very stubborn. He expresses his unhappiness in many other ways. He is, therefore, not in the same category as the donkey.

A farmer called Jhuri belonging to the kachi community had two oxen, named Hira and Moti. They were of a good breed—good to look at, hard working, tall and well built. Having stayed together and worked together for so long, they had become like brothers. They would either sit facing each other or close beside and talk to each other in a silent language. No one can tell how one understood what was going on in the other’s mind. Certainly they had some hidden powers that man, who claims to be the most superior among all living things, does not possess. They would show their affection by sniffing or licking each other. Sometimes they would lock their horns—

not to fight but out of love and companionship. After all, without such special closeness any friendship is meaningless. When they were yoked to a cart or a plough and they would shake their heads and start pulling the load, each would try his best to carry the maximum load and spare the other. When they were freed after a long, hard day's work they would lick and sniff each other and feel refreshed. When their trough was filled with fodder, they would get up together, put their heads in the trough and sit side by side to eat. When one would finish, the other too would take his head out of the trough.

Once Jhuri sent the pair to his in-laws on loan. The poor oxen didn't know where they were being sent or why; they thought their master had sold them off. Jhuri's brother-in-law had a tough time driving them home. If he pushed them forward, they would run to the right or the left but never ahead. If he pulled from the front, they would dig their heels in and pull backwards. If he whipped them, they would try to gore him with their horns. If god had given them the power of speech, they would have asked Jhuri, 'Why are you sending us away? We have tried our best to serve you. If you are not satisfied with our work, we will try to work harder. We are willing to die working for you. We have never complained about anything. We have quietly eaten whatever you have given us. Why have you then sold us to this cruel man?'

By the evening the two oxen reached their new home. They hadn't eaten all day, yet when they were brought to the trough, they would not even bring their heads close to it. Their hearts were heavy. They were sad at leaving what they had always considered their home. The new place, new village, new people—everything seemed strange.

The pair spoke to each other in their silent language. They looked at each other from the corners of their eyes and lay down. When the village lay fast asleep, they broke their ropes and started walking homewards. They had been secured with strong ropes. No one could have imagined that any oxen could break free, but these two were at that moment filled with a supernatural strength. They broke away with just one tug.

When Jhuri woke up in the morning, he saw the oxen standing at the trough. Half-broken ropes dangled from their necks. Their legs were covered in mud. Their eyes gleamed with love.

Jhuri too was very happy to see them. He ran and hugged them. That sight of man and beast hugging and kissing each other was wonderful.

Boys from far and near assembled to greet the oxen and welcome them back by clapping their hands. In the history of the village, this incident was important. The children decided that the two brave animals must be suitably 'awarded'. Someone ran to fetch roti from their house, others *gur*, or *choker*, or hay.

One boy said, 'No one can have such oxen.'

The other agreed, 'They came alone from so far away!'

The third said, 'They aren't oxen; they were human beings in another birth.'

No one had the courage to disagree with such a statement.

Jhuri's wife saw the oxen and was enraged. She said, 'The disloyal creatures! They didn't work there for even a single day! They ran away instead.'

Jhuri couldn't stand such an accusation against his oxen. He said, 'Why disloyal? If they weren't fed there, what were the poor things to do?'

The wife answered with a lot of pride, 'Yes, you are the only one who feeds his animals; others merely keep their animals on water.'

Jhuri teased her, 'They wouldn't have run if they had been fed.'

The wife got angry. 'They ran away because my family doesn't believe in spoiling animals with too much love. They give animals enough to eat, but they also know how to take work from them. These two are idlers and shirkers; that's why they must have run away. I won't give them oil cakes and fresh grass any more; they'll get dry hay, that's all. They can eat it or go hungry.'

And that is exactly what happened. She instructed the farm helper to give them nothing but dry hay.

The oxen put their faces in the trough and found tasteless fodder. No oil cakes, no sweet, juicy grass. What were they to eat? They began to look hopefully towards the door of their shed.

Jhuri came and asked the farm helper, 'Why haven't you given them any oil cakes?'

'The mistress will kill me if I do!'

'Do it when she is not looking.'

'No, no, later you will also scold me.'

The next day, Jhuri's brother-in-law came again to take the oxen away. This time he tied them to a bullock-cart so it would be easier to drive them.

A couple of times Moti tried to push the cart off the road into the ditch but Hira pulled it back. Of the two, Hira was more patient.

They reached their new home in the evening and were tied with stout ropes. To teach them a lesson for yesterday's mischief, they were beaten and then given dry hay to eat. Jhuri's brother-in-law gave his own oxen plenty of fresh juicy grass and lots of oil cakes.

Hira and Moti had never been treated so badly. Jhuri had always been kind and loving. At the smallest signal from him, the two would run like the wind. Here they were beaten and then humiliated by being given dry hay.

They didn't even raise their faces to look towards the trough.

The next day, their new master, Gaya, yoked them to the plough. But these two had, it seems, taken a vow not to lift their legs. Gaya beat them so much that he became tired, yet the pair of oxen did not lift their legs. When cruel Gaya kept hitting Hira on the nose, Moti's anger grew out of control. He ran away with the plough. The plough, rope, pin, harness—everything broke into pieces. If they didn't have long ropes around their necks, it would have been impossible to catch them.

Hira spoke in his mute language, 'It is futile to run.'

Moti answered, 'He nearly killed you.'

'This time he will beat us even more.'

'Let him; after all, we have been born as oxen, how long can we escape the beatings?'

Gaya was running towards them with two men in tow. The men carried stout sticks.

Moti said, 'What do you say—shall we give him a taste of his own medicine? Look at him, coming armed with sticks!'

Hira tried to reason with him, 'No, brother. Stand still.'

'If anyone beats me, I shall knock down one or two.'

'No, that is not the way we do things.'

Moti controlled his anger. Gaya reached them and began pulling them away by the ropes. It was a good thing, he didn't beat them right then, or else there would have been no stopping Moti. Gaya and his helpers took one look at Moti and understood that it was best to postpone punishments.

Again, the same old dry hay was put before them. The two stood silently. Gaya's family sat down to eat. A little girl came with two rotis and put one each in their mouth. Their hunger could not be slaked with that one roti, but their hearts certainly were filled to the brim. So, there were good people in this family too! The little girl had lost her mother. Her stepmother beat her often and she felt a certain fellow feeling with these oxen.

The two would be tied to the yoke all day long, beaten and whipped. In the evening they would be tied to a post. Every evening the little girl would come to feed them a roti each. Such was the wonder of this offering made out of love that despite the dry hay they were given every day, they did not become weak. But in their eyes and in every part of their body a strong sense of rebellion grew day by day.

One day, Moti spoke in his mute language, 'I can bear it no more, Hira!'

'What do you plan to do?'

'I want to lift one or two of them on my horns and throw them far away.'

'But don't you know, that sweet little girl who feeds us a roti every day is his daughter? Won't she become an orphan?'

'Why don't I throw the mistress? She beats the little girl every day.'

'You forget, it is wrong to hurt a woman.'

'If you won't let me do it my way, tell me what you have in mind? Shall we break the ropes and run away again?'

'Yes, I agree to that, but how will we break such strong ropes?'

'There is a way out. First, let us chew the ropes a little. Then it will be easier to break them.'

At night when the little girl fed them a roti each and went away, they tried nibbling at their ropes. But they couldn't get their teeth around the thick rope. They tried and tried but could not succeed.

Suddenly, the door opened and the little girl came in. The oxen bent their heads and began to lick her hand. Their tails stood erect. The girl patted their forehead and said, 'I am going to untie you. Run away or else these people will kill you. I heard them talking at home; they are planning to drive a rope through your nose to tame you.'

She untied their ropes, but the two stood unmoving.

Moti asked in his mute language, 'Why aren't we leaving?'

Hira said, 'If we escape, they won't spare this poor orphan. They will suspect her.'

Suddenly, the girl cried loudly, 'Uncle's oxen are running away! Father! Father! Come quickly!'

Gaya ran out of the house to see what was happening. Hira and Moti sped off. Gaya ran after them. They ran faster. Gaya raised a shout. He gathered some people from the village to help him chase the fleeing animals. The two friends decided to make the most of this opportunity; they ran like they had never run before. They didn't know where they were going. This wasn't the way they had come. They passed unknown villages till they stopped beside a field to take stock of their situation.

Hira said, 'It looks like we have lost our way.'

'Why did you have to run like that? We should have just knocked him off there and then.'

'If we had knocked him off, what would people have said? He can do wrong things if he wishes; but why should we?'

Hunger was making them restless. The field was full of tender green peas. They began to graze. Every now and then, they would raise their heads and listen for sounds of approaching footsteps.

When they had eaten their fill, a sense of freedom dawned on them and they began to jump around with joy. They bellowed loudly like oxen do, then locked their horns and began to push each other backwards playfully. Moti pushed Hira several steps back till he fell over into a ditch. Then Hira too became angry. He pulled himself out of the ditch and began to push Moti. Moti sensed that the game was no longer a game, so he abandoned it.

III

Suddenly, they saw a snorting bull rushing towards them. The two friends were taken by surprise. The bull was huge, almost the size of an elephant—and clearly it wanted to fight with them. They knew they would lose but what could they do? It was rushing towards them, bent on knocking them down.

Moti said in his mute language, 'What terrible luck! Do you think we will get away alive from this? Think of a way out quickly!'

Hira said worriedly, 'Look at him—he's swollen with pride. He won't listen to the voice of reason.'

'Shall we run away?'

'Cowards run away.'

‘You are welcome to die here; I am going to run.’

‘And if he chases you?’

‘Then think of a way out.’

‘The only way out is that the two of us should attack him together. I shall attack from the front; you push from behind. He will run away after this two-sided attack. If he comes towards me, you jab him in the stomach with your horns. I know it will be a tough fight, but what else can we do?’

The two friends ran together in the face of danger. The bull had no experience of fighting a collective force. He knew how to fight one enemy at a time. As he ran towards Hira, Moti attacked from the rear. When the bull turned towards him, Hira attacked. The bull wanted to defeat them one at a time but they didn’t give him a chance. The bull leapt towards Hira, determined to kill him, when Moti dashed from another side to gore him in the stomach. Enraged, it turned around to find Hira ready to attack once again. Till, finally, the poor bull ran away with the two friends giving chase. The oxen decided to leave him alone only when he fell down. Drunk on a sense of victory, they walked away, leaving the bull lying on the ground.

Moti spoke in his sign language, ‘I wanted to kill that creature.’

Hira spoke pityingly, ‘We ought not to use our horns on a fallen enemy.’

‘Rubbish! I say we should hit the fallen enemy so hard that he may never rise again.’

‘Think of a way of returning home instead.’

‘Let’s eat something; then, we will think.’

A field of green peas lay ahead. Moti entered it. Hira kept telling him not to go there but he wouldn’t listen. He had barely eaten two mouthfuls when men carrying sticks pounced on them. Hira had been standing at the edge of the field, so he could run away, but Moti was standing inside the freshly watered field. His hooves dug into the wet earth and he couldn’t run. He was caught. Hira saw his friend was in trouble so he turned back thinking, ‘If we have to get caught, let’s get caught together.’ The two friends were captured. The next morning both were put in a cattle pound.

For the first time in their entire lives, the two friends spent a whole day without getting even a straw of hay to eat. They could not understand what sort of man their new master was. Even Gaya was better! There were several buffaloes in the pound, as well as goats, horses and donkeys. But none had any fodder placed before them. They lay like corpses on the ground. Some had become so weak that they could barely stand up. All day long, the two friends looked unblinkingly towards the door of the pound, but no one came to give them anything to eat. Driven by hunger, they began to lick the mud-plastered wall, but its saltiness could give them no satisfaction.

When they were not given any fodder till late at night, the fire of rebellion rose in Hira's heart.

He said to Moti, 'I can't tolerate this any more.'

Moti answered with his head bent low, 'I feel as though I am going to die.'

'Don't give up so easily. We should think of a way of running away from this place. Let's break the wall down.'

'I don't have the strength to do that.'

'Is this all the strength you have? You who have always been such a show-off?'

'Yes, all my pride is gone.'

The pound had mud walls. Hira was strong. He dug his sharp, pointed horns in the mud wall till one big chunk of dried mud fell down. Encouraged, he ran towards the wall, making repeated attacks. With every attack, more mud fell off.

At that very moment, a guard holding a lantern came to take the attendance of all the animals in the pound. He saw the damage done by Hira and beat him several times with a stick and tied him up with a stout rope.

Moti spoke, from his prone position, 'What did you get from that display of strength? Nothing but beatings!'

'At least I tried.'

'What's the point of trying when it gets you tied up more securely?'

'I'll keep on trying, no matter how strongly they keep on tying me.'

'You will end up losing your life.'

'Never mind. We shall die either way. Just imagine—if we had pulled the wall down, how many lives we could have saved! So many of our brothers

are tied here. No one seems to have any strength left in his body. If they go on like this, they will die in the next few days.'

'Yes, that is true. Come on, then. Let me try my best too.'

Moti too dug his horns in the same spot on the wall. Some more mud fell. His courage grew. He began to dig his horns into the dried mud of the wall as though he was fighting an enemy. After about two hours of hard work, the top portion of the wall fell down. He pushed again with all his strength. This time, half the wall fell down.

When a big chunk of the wall fell, the half-dead animals began to show signs of life. The three horses were the first to run away. Then the goats sped off, followed by the buffaloes. But the donkeys kept standing.

Hira asked, 'Why don't the two of you run away like the others?'

One of the donkeys said, 'What if we are caught again?'

'So what? You have the chance to escape now, make the most of it.'

'No, we are scared; we'll stay here.'

It was past midnight. The donkeys stood in deep thought, wondering whether to run or not and Moti was busy trying to untie his friend's rope. When Moti finally grew tired, Hira said, 'You go away, leave me here. Perhaps we shall meet again somewhere.'

Moti said with tears in his eyes, 'Hira, do you think I am so selfish? We have been friends for so long. Now that you are in trouble, do you think I will leave you alone?'

Hira said, 'They will beat us black and blue. They will know this is your handiwork.'

Moti spoke with pride, 'I don't care if I am beaten for the same crime for which they have tied you up with ropes. At least we were able to save the lives of eight or ten living things. At least we will get their blessings.'

And so saying, Moti shooed the two reluctant donkeys out of the pound, nudging them out with his horns. Then he went and lay down beside his friend.

There is no need to describe the commotion that took place among the manager of the pound, the watchmen and other workers. It should be enough to say that Moti was beaten up brutally and he too was tied with a thick rope.

The two friends remained tied up for a week. No one gave them one grain of feed or even a straw of hay. Though, once a day, water was given to them. That was all they had. They grew so weak that they could barely stand up. Their bones began to show through their skin.

One day, someone began to beat a small drum in front of the pound. By the afternoon, fifty or sixty people had gathered. The two friends were taken out and displayed. People would walk up, take one look at them and walk away in disgust. Who would want to buy such half-dead oxen?

Suddenly, a bearded man with bloodshot eyes and a cruel-looking face came up to inspect them. Digging his fingers in their haunches, he began to speak to the pound's manager. One look at the man's face and the two friends instantly knew who he was. They began to tremble with fear. Who was he and why he was poking his fingers in their body? They had no doubts about the answer. They looked at each other with terror-filled eyes and bent their heads.

Hira said, 'If only we hadn't run away from Gaya's home! Now no one can save us.'

Moti spoke in the tone of a disbeliever, 'They say that god has mercy for everyone. Why does He not show us His mercy?'

'Because for Him, our living or dying makes no difference. Never mind. Think of it like this—at least we shall live with Him for some time. One day god had saved us in the guise of that little girl. He might do the same again.'

'This man will slit our throats with his knife. You wait and see!'

'Then why worry? Flesh, skin, bones, horns—everything will be put to some use or the other.'

On being auctioned off, the two friends went away with the bearded man. Every part of their body trembled with fear. They could barely lift their legs, but they were so scared that they stumbled on as fast as they could. The moment they slackened their pace, the man would beat them hard with his stick.

On their way, they came across a herd of cattle grazing in a field. They looked happy and healthy. Some sat about grazing, others ran and jumped and played games with each other. They led such happy lives, yet they were so selfish. They didn't care that two of their brothers were so unhappy in the hands of a butcher.

Suddenly, the two felt as though the road they were travelling on seemed familiar. Yes, this was the path Gaya had taken them along. These were the same fields, orchards and villages. Their steps grew faster with every passing minute. All traces of weakness and tiredness left their bodies. And lo and behold, there lay their own grazing ground at the outskirts of their village. And this was the well where they used to come.

Moti said, 'Our home is close by.'

Hira answered, 'It is god's grace.'

'I shall run away to my home.'

'Do you think he will let us?'

'I'll throw him down.'

'No, no. Let's run till our barn; we shall go no further from there.'

Like two young calves, they ran at breakneck speed. They reached the stall at their barn and came to a standstill. The bearded man too came running after them.

Jhuri was sitting at his doorstep enjoying the winter sun. He ran towards the oxen the moment he spotted them and hugged each one by one. Tears of happiness began to stream down the eyes of the two friends. One began to lick Jhuri's hand.

The bearded man came running and grasped the trailing ropes of the oxen.

Jhuri said, 'They are my oxen.'

'How can they be yours? I have just bought them in an auction from the cattle pound.'

'I think you have stolen them. Go away quietly. They are my oxen. They can be sold only when I sell them. Who has the right to auction my oxen?'

'I shall make a report against you to the police.'

'They are my oxen. The proof is that they are standing at my door.'

The bearded man began to angrily pull at the ropes of the two oxen. Moti turned on him with his horns. The bearded man stepped back. Moti again tried to gore him. This time the bearded man ran. Moti ran after him. They reached the village outskirts. Moti stopped and saw that the bearded man was standing at a distance making threats, shouting abuses and throwing stones at him. But Moti stood like a victorious soldier blocking his way. The people from the village stood about watching this drama and laughing. Finally, the bearded man accepted defeat and went away. Moti returned home, strutting with pride.

Hira said, 'I was scared that you might kill him in your anger.'
'If he had caught me, I wouldn't have let go without killing him.'
'He will never come here again.'
'I will teach him a lesson if he does! He dare not touch us.'
'What if he gets us shot?'
'I'll die but I won't be of any use to him.'
'No one cares for us.'
'That is because we are so simple.'

Within a matter of minutes, their troughs were filled with fresh, juicy green fodder, oil cakes and grain. The two friends began to eat. Jhuri stood close by, patting them and scores of boys gathered all around to watch. The entire village seemed pleased to have them back.

And then the mistress came and kissed each one on his forehead.

A Quarter and One Ser of Wheat

In a village somewhere, there lived a farmer named Shankar. He was a poor man who led a simple life and did not meddle in other people's affairs. Since he himself knew no clever tricks, he never worried about being fooled by others. He ate well when he had enough food in the house. When he didn't, he lived on parched gram. When there was no gram either, he drank water, thanked Lord Rama and went to sleep. But when a guest happened to come by, he had to make an exception. And when a sadhu or holy man happened to show up at his door, it was a different matter. He could go to sleep hungry himself, but how could he make a sadhu sleep on an empty stomach, for a sadhu was a true follower of god!

One evening a sadhu appeared at Shankar's doorstep. His face glowed with a divine light. He was dressed in yellow clothes. His hair was long and matted. In his hand he carried a brass pot for water, on his feet he wore wooden clogs, and spectacles on his eyes. All in all, he looked like the sort of person who showed as keen an interest in the prayers of the rich and travelling to pilgrim spots in aeroplanes as he did in eating good food.

Shankar only had ground barley at home. How could he give that to a sadhu? In ancient times, barley may have been considered good, but in the present age, barley is believed to be hard to digest for people of a better class. Poor Shankar was in a dilemma: What was he to give the holy man to eat? Finally, he decided he must borrow some wheat flour from somewhere. But he could find no one who had any wheat flour. After all, only simple human beings lived in the village, so how could food fit for the gods be found here? However, by great good fortune, the village priest had some wheat. Shankar borrowed a quarter and one ser, a bare kilo of wheat, took it home and asked his wife to grind it into flour. The sadhu mahatma ate well, slept well, gave his blessings and left early next morning.

Twice a year, the priest took a share of the harvest. That year, Shankar decided that returning one and a quarter ser of wheat was pointless, so instead of the usual five ser he gave the priest, he would give a little extra

and the account would be settled. Shankar figured the priest would know why the extra amount was being given and the matter would be over. In the month of Chait, when the priest showed up to take his share of the harvest, Shankar gave him double the usual amount and considered himself free of the burden of debt. He made no mention of it and neither did the priest. How was poor Shankar to know that he would have to take another birth to repay the debt of that one and a quarter ser of wheat!

II

Seven years passed. The priest became a moneylender, and from a farmer Shankar became a labourer. His younger brother, Mangal, demanded his share of the property and became independent. Together, the brothers had been farmers, but once they divided their lands they ended up with nothing and had to become labourers. Shankar tried his best to avoid a division in the family but the situation was beyond his control. The day separate kitchens were set up in his home, he cried like a baby. Brothers became enemies. All ties were broken. For several days he could not eat. He would work hard in the summer sun all day long. At night he would cover his face and go to sleep. He worked so hard and gave such extreme hardships to his body that he fell ill. For months afterwards he could not get up from his bed. How was he to live and on what? Between them, the brothers had five *bighas* of land. Now there was just two and a half *bighas* and one bullock. What use was that? Things became so bad that he was reduced to being a farmer in name only; it was not farming that earned him his livelihood but working as a hired hand for whoever was ready to pay him his wages.

One day, as Shankar was returning home, the priest stopped him, saying, 'Come over tomorrow and settle your accounts. You have an outstanding amount of five and a half *mann* of wheat against you and you are showing no signs of paying it back. You seem to have forgotten all about it!'

Surprised, Shankar asked, 'When did I borrow wheat from you? And how has it become five and a half *mann*? You seem to forget, I never take so much as an ounce from anyone, nor keep a paisa of debt.'

'It is because of your greed that you are in such a bad state today,' the priest said and then mentioned the one and a quarter ser of wheat Shankar had borrowed from him seven years ago. Shankar was amazed. 'Oh, my god!' he said to himself. 'I have given him a share from my harvest

countless number of times, and what has he ever done for me? Whenever he has shown up at my door on any occasion—good or bad—I have always given him a token sum of money. But look at his greed! He has been sitting on that one and a quarter ser of wheat like a hen sits on an egg and today it has become a ghost that wants to gobble me up! Had he even mentioned it in all these years, I would have measured exactly one and a quarter ser of wheat and given it to him. Was it for this day that he kept silent for all these years?’

To the priest, he said, ‘I may not have specified that I was returning the wheat I borrowed from you but several times when you came to take your share of the harvest I would give you extra—sometimes one ser, sometimes two. Now you are asking for five and a half *mann*; where am I to get that?’

The priest answered, ‘You can give away whatever you might please; that is extra. But you must pay up what is written in the account book; that is fixed. There is no account of what you have given. You say you gave four times the share of the harvest; maybe you did. But in my account book, there is a sum of five and a half *mann* of wheat written against your name. You get whoever you want to look at it and check the calculation. I will cross your name the day you settle your account; or else the amount will keep increasing.’

Shankar answered, ‘Why are you troubling a poor man like me? I have barely enough to eat; where will I get so much wheat from?’

‘That’s for you to decide. I will not leave even one ounce. If you don’t pay in this world, I shall take it from you in the other world.’

Shankar shook with fear. An educated man like me would have said, ‘Fine, take it in the other world, the measures of weight won’t be more there.’ But Shankar was not the clever, argumentative kind of person. A debt was bad enough, but owing it to a Brahmin . . . ! ‘If my name remains in a Brahmin’s account book, I shall go straight to hell!’ the very thought terrified him. He said, ‘I will give whatever I owe you in this world itself; why should I wait for the other world? This birth is bad enough, why should I sow thorns for my next life too? But I must say, this is not fair. You have made a mountain out of a seed of rye. You are a Brahmin; you shouldn’t do such things. You should have asked for it then, not waited for it to become such a huge burden. I shall give you whatever you demand, but you will have to answer for it before god.’

The priest answered, 'You should be scared of facing god, I have no reason to. When I go to face god, I shall be among my brothers. Hermits, ascetics, gods—they are all Brahmins. If something goes against me, we shall take care of it. So, tell me, when are you going to pay up?'

'I don't exactly have it lying at home. I can give it only after I have borrowed it from someone.'

'That is not acceptable to me. It has been seven years already. I can't give you another day extra. If you can't return the wheat, sign these papers.'

'I have to return what I owe; it matters very little to me whether you take the wheat or the papers. What is the amount you will charge for the wheat?'

'The same as the market price. Instead of the five and a half *mann*, I shall charge you only for five and a quarter.'

'Why leave the quarter? I don't want to owe you anything and be held responsible in my next life.'

When the amount was calculated, it worked out to sixty rupees. A document was prepared for sixty rupees, with interest at three rupees. If Shankar didn't pay up in a year, the interest amount would climb to two and a half rupees extra. The stamp cost eight *annas* and Shankar had to pay for drawing up and drafting the document.

The entire village criticized the priest, but no one could say it to his face. Everyone needed something from a moneylender. No one wanted to get into any trouble with him.

III

Shankar worked hard for a year. He had promised himself that he would pay the amount before its due date. Earlier, food would be cooked in his home only in the evening; during the day the family would survive on parched gram. In the past year, that had stopped too. Roti was now made in the evenings for the little boy. The only money Shankar used to earlier spend on himself was a paisa's worth of tobacco every day. When he took his oath, he stopped that bad habit too. He threw away his pipe, broke his hukka and smashed the tobacco container into little pieces. His clothes were already quite tattered; now they seemed to have disappeared from sight altogether. He would spend the bitterest cold winter nights by sitting beside the fire. The result of this extreme self-control was beyond his expectations. By the end of the year he had collected sixty rupees. He thought he would

give the money to the priest and tell him he would get the rest as soon as possible. After all, it was only a matter of another fifteen rupees. Wouldn't he, after all, agree to even that? He took the sixty rupees and put them at the priest's feet. Panditji asked in surprise, 'Have you borrowed them from someone?'

Shankar replied, 'No, my lord. Because of your blessings, I have been able to earn good wages this year.'

'But there are only sixty rupees here.'

'Take this now; I will return the rest in the next two or three months and then you can set me free.'

'I shall set you free only when you have returned every last *cowrie* you owe me. Go and get the fifteen rupees you still owe me.'

'Have pity on me; I stay hungry all day, in the evenings too sometimes I get to eat, sometimes I don't. I live in this village. I am not going to run away with your money.'

'I don't want to get into the trouble of chasing you. If I don't get all my money back, I shall start charging interest at the rate of three and a half rupees. You can take your sixty rupees back with you, or you can leave them with me.'

'All right; keep the money. I'll go and try to organize fifteen rupees from somewhere.'

Shankar tried his best but no one gave him the money— not because people didn't trust him or they didn't have the money to give, but because no one had the courage to take away the priest's easy target.

IV

Every action has a reaction. When despite working so hard for an entire year, Shankar could still not free himself from debt, his determination turned naturally into despair. He understood that if his year-long hardships could fetch him no more than sixty rupees, there was no way that he could possibly save twice as much in the coming year. If he must totter under the burden of debt, it mattered little whether the load on his head weighed one *mann* or a *mann* and a quarter. His enthusiasm to repay the debt lessened. He began to hate hard work.

Hope is the mother of enthusiasm. Hope has strength and power. It is the only energy that drives the world. Shankar became hopeless and, therefore,

sad. Those needs that he had kept at bay for the past year were no longer like beggars who came and stood at his door; they turned into evil spirits that sit on your chest and refuse to go away till they have got what they want from you. There is a limit to the patches you can put on your clothes. Now when Shankar received his wages, he would not hold back a single rupee. Sometimes he would buy clothes, at other times something to eat. Where earlier he used to only smoke tobacco, now he picked up the bad habits of smoking ganja and charas. He was in no hurry to repay the loan. He acted as though he didn't owe anyone a single paisa. Earlier he would go to work even when he had fever; now he looked for excuses not to work.

Three years passed in this manner. The priest didn't ask for his money even once. Like a clever hunter, he waited for the right occasion to take aim. It was against his policy to alert the prey to the danger lying in wait.

One day, the priest sent for Shankar and showed him the accounts. After deducting the sixty rupees already deposited, there were still 120 rupees owing against Shankar's name.

Shankar said, 'I can give you that sort of money in some other birth, not in this one!'

'But I shall take it in this very lifetime. If you can't return the capital, you must at least pay the interest.'

'I have nothing except one bullock; take that if you want.'

'What will I do with your bullock? You still have a lot to give me.'

'What else is there?'

'You are there. After all, you go somewhere to work, don't you, and I too have to keep someone to care for my lands. You start working for me to pay off your interest and return the capital whenever you can. The truth is that now you can no longer work for anyone else till you return all the money you owe me. No one would be willing to employ you, knowing that you owe me money. You have no property, nothing that you can keep with me instead of the money you owe me. So how can I let you off? Who is there to ensure that you will pay my interest amount every month? When you can't work anywhere else to return the interest amount, no one can imagine that you will ever return the capital.'

'If I work for you to repay the interest, what shall I live on?'

'You have a wife and children; have they had their hands chopped off that they must sit idle at home? Let them work too. I shall give you half a ser of barley to eat every day. Once a year I shall give you a blanket and

also get a quilted jacket stitched for you to keep you warm. What else do you need? While it is true that others paid you six *annas*, I don't really need you that much. I am employing you only to help you repay your loan.'

Shankar was lost in deep thought. Then he said, 'This sounds like life-long slavery.'

'You can call it slavery, or you can call it wages. But I am not going to leave you till you return the money you owe me. If you run away, your son will have to return it. Though if no one remains from your family, it will be a different matter then.'

There was no appeal against such an announcement. Who would step forward to help a labourer? There was nowhere to take shelter or run to. Shankar began to work for the priest from the next day itself. For the sake of a quarter and one ser of wheat, he had to wear the chains of slavery for the rest of his life. If there was anything to give him comfort it was the thought that he was being punished for a previous birth. His wife had to do chores she had never done before. His children were nearly always hungry. And Shankar could do nothing except quietly watch them suffer. Like a curse of the gods, those grains of wheat were never to leave his life.

V

Shankar worked for the priest as an unpaid slave for twenty long years till he left this world that had treated him so badly. At the time of his death, a sum of 120 rupees was still written against his name. The priest didn't consider it appropriate to trouble him in the other world; after all, he wasn't such a cruel man! Instead, he caught hold of Shankar's son. The young man still works for the priest. When he will be set free, whether he will be set free or not—god alone has the answer.

Dear Readers, do not treat this as a work of fiction. This is based on a true story. The world is not empty of such Shankars and such priests.

The Price of Milk

Most big cities have midwives, doctors and nurses, but in villages the local sweepress still rules over the labour room. And the situation is not likely to change in the near future. Babu Maheshnath, the zamindar of his village and an educated man who agreed that the state of affairs needed to be changed, was helpless when it came to making changes in the way babies were brought into this world. Most nurses refused to come to his village to deliver his baby, and the ones who agreed to come after a lot of persuasion, asked for so much money that poor Babu sahib had to return home empty-handed. With nurses charging such fees, he couldn't even think of approaching a lady doctor. He would have to sell half his lands to afford her fee! So, after three daughters, when a fourth child was on its way, he had no choice but to fall back on the services of Gudarh, the sweeper and Bhungi, his wife.

Babies are usually born at night. At close to midnight, a servant was sent to beat the door of Gudarh's hut so loudly that he woke up the entire neighbourhood. This time it wasn't a girl and there was no reason to call out in a feeble voice.

For this occasion, preparations had been going on in Gudarh's home for months. If it was a girl again, the husband and wife were scared they would get nothing more than the usual one rupee and a sari. How they had argued and laid bets for months! The wife would say, 'If it isn't a boy this time, I won't show you my face ever again. Yes, yes, I tell you, I won't show my face here ever again. All the signs say it will be a boy this time.' And Gudarh would say, 'You wait and see, it will be a girl again. I will shave off my moustache if it is a boy this time.'

Now, hearing the loud beating of the door, Bhungi laughed delightedly and said, 'Now get your moustache shaved! Didn't I say it would be a boy? But you wouldn't listen to me. Let me shave your moustache with my own hands; I will make sure I don't leave a single hair.'

‘I will shave my own moustache. Do you think it won’t grow back? Three days from now, it will be back, you wait and see. But, remember, I will take half of what you get as reward.’

Bhungi wagged her thumb at him, handed him their three-month-old son and walked away with the zamindar’s servant.

Gudarh called after her, ‘Where are you running off to? I want to go with the others to join the celebrations at the zamindar’s house. Who will take care of the baby?’

Bhungi kept walking away as she answered, ‘Put him to sleep on the ground. I will feed him when I return.’

II

This time Bhungi was welcomed in Maheshnath’s house with a great show of hospitality. Every morning, a sweet, nourishing milky drink would be prepared for her; in the afternoon there would be puri and halwa and more of the same in the evening and at night. Gudarh too would be fed heartily. Bhungi could get away barely once or twice a day to feed her own son. Arrangements were made for extra milk for her little boy. Bhungi’s own milk was exclusively for the Babu sahib’s fortunate son. This continued even twelve days after the baby’s birth.* The mistress was a strong, healthy woman, yet this time, due to some strange reason, she could not nurse her baby herself. Earlier, when the three daughters had been born, she had given milk in such abundance that the poor little girls had suffered from indigestion! But this time, there was not a drop of milk. So, Bhungi, the midwife, was asked to do double duty as wet-nurse.

The mistress would tell Bhungi, ‘Nurse my baby well and you won’t have to lift a finger ever again for as long as you live. I will make sure that you get five *bighas* free land. Even your grandchildren will live a life of comfort and plenty.’

Meanwhile, Bhungi’s own son, unable to digest the alien milk, would continually throw up. Day by day, he steadily lost weight and became weak.

Bhungi would tell the mistress, ‘I am telling you in advance—I will take bracelets at your son’s head-shaving ceremony.’

And the mistress would answer, 'Yes, yes. You will get them. There is no need to threaten. Do you want silver or gold ones?'

'If I go around wearing silver bracelets, what would people say?'

'All right, you will get gold bracelets.'

'And when your son gets married, I will take a necklace for myself and silver wristbands for my husband.'

'You will get those as well. May god show us that day!'

Bhungi occupied a high position in the household, second only to the mistress. All the maids, cooks and other domestic servants gave her due respect; even the mistress allowed herself to be moved by Bhungi and her opinions. Once, Bhungi even scolded the master of the house. There was some discussion about the caste system and Maheshnath happened to say, 'Untouchables will always remain untouchables. No matter whatever else might change in this world, you can't turn untouchables into civilized human beings.'

Hearing this, Bhungi retorted, 'Master, it is the untouchables who make it possible for the high and mighty to live like civilized human beings.'

At any other occasion, Bhungi would not have had a single hair left on her head for such disrespect. But today, Maheshnath simply laughed and brushed aside the incident.

III

Bhungi's rule could not last beyond one year. The village pandits objected to the infant drinking the milk of an untouchable and Moteram Shastri, a learned Brahmin, suggested a suitable penance must be made for this awful sin. The nursing was stopped immediately, but Maheshnath refused to consider the idea of a penance. He scolded the pandit, 'Till yesterday my boy lived on the life blood of that sweepress, so he must be totally impure too. I must say that's some religion you have!'

Shastriji answered with a toss of his topknot, 'It is true, till yesterday he lived on the blood of that untouchable woman. He was nourished on meat since she ate meat. But that was yesterday and that is over and done with. We are concerned about today. At the Jagannath Puri temple, the high castes and the untouchables sit together for a communal feast, but the same cannot

be done here. When we fall ill, we may eat without taking a bath or eat a plain dish of dal and rice. But when we are well once again, we go back to our normal way of life. We have different sets of rules—for ordinary, everyday circumstances and extraordinary ones.'

'Do you mean religion is a changeable thing—sometimes one thing, at other times something else?'

'Of course. The religion of a king is different from his subjects, just as a rich man's religion is different from a poor man's. Rajas and maharajas can eat what they want, marry whomever they want—there is nothing to stop them. They are superior. Rules and restrictions are for ordinary people.'

Panditji's idea of penance was thrown out, but Bhungi had to step down from her throne. When the time came for her to leave the zamindar's house, she was given so many gifts that she was unable to carry them all away on her own. She got the gold bracelets that she had wanted; she also got two pretty saris, and not cotton ones like she had got when the girls had been born.

IV

The same year there was an acute outbreak of plague. Gudarh was among its first victims. But life went on for Bhungi. People thought she might run off with someone or the other. There was even some talk about a certain sweeper and a certain Chaudhry—both of whom would come to see her sometimes. But nothing came of it. Bhungi did not go anywhere. Five years went by and her son, Mangal, despite being weak and often sick, began to run about and play. Compared to Maheshnath's son, Suresh, he looked like a dwarf.

A sewer in Maheshnath's house got blocked and began flooding the courtyard with dirty water. Bhungi was asked to clear it. She stuck a long pole in the blocked drain and began to shake it. Her arm was all the way inside the sewer when, suddenly, she let out a loud scream and pulled her arm back. At the same time, a black snake crawled out of the drain. At first people thought it was a water snake and therefore harmless. So no one paid any attention to poor Bhungi. But when the poison spread all over her body and she began to shake and tremble, they realized she had been bitten by a poisonous snake. By then it was too late to save poor Bhungi.

Mangal became an orphan. He took to hanging about Mahesh babu's doorway in the hope of being fed. The zamindar's household had enough leftover food to feed five or ten lads like him. While there was no shortage of food, by now Mangal was old enough to feel bad when the zamindar's servants dropped food from a distance on to his clay pots, making sure their hands never touched his pots. He noticed that everyone else ate out of pretty dishes and fine plates, while there were only clay pots for him. Even the torn piece of old sacking he slept on was considered untouchable. The village boys teased him mercilessly. Nor would they let him play with them.

Mangal had made his home under a neem tree in front of Maheshnath's house. It had a torn piece of sackcloth, two clay pots and one dhoti, which was an old one handed down from Suresh. The spot under the neem tree remained equally comfortable in winter, summer and rain. Mangal lived there in the numbing winter chill, the scorching summer *loo* and the heavy monsoon rains. In fact, he became stronger and healthier than ever before.

If there was anyone he could call his own in the whole wide world, it was a village dog. Fed up with the cruelties of the other dogs, it had found Mangal. And now both boy and dog would eat together and sleep together on the same piece of sackcloth. They had similar tastes and temperaments too and both had begun recognizing each other's moods. They lived peacefully together and never fought.

The religious people of the village expressed their surprise and disapproval of Babu saheb's generosity. He had allowed the untouchable boy to set up home barely fifty feet away from his own front door. Not only did it go against every religious principle, the very idea was disgusting. *Chee! Chee!* They grumbled, 'If such a horrible practice is allowed to continue, it will mean the end of our religion. God created untouchables—we accept that. And we must not be unfair to them—that, too, we know. After all, God is the Saviour of the lowly and the fallen, but there are rules of social behaviour that must be followed. We don't feel like approaching Babu saheb's door but he is the village zamindar and we have to go—no matter how disgusted we feel.'

Unconcerned by the grumbling, Mangal and his dog, Tommy, remained best friends. Mangal would say, 'Now look here, Tommy, shift a little and go to sleep. You have taken all the space; where will I sleep?'

Tommy would whimper softly, wag his tail and instead of moving away, snuggle closer to Mangal and begin to lick his face.

Every evening Mangal would go to look at his old home and cry a little. The thatched roof had fallen in the first year; one wall had crumbled in the second year. Now all that was left were three half walls, their broken tops facing the sky. This was all that remained of the only place he had ever known any form of love. The memory of that love drew him, again and again, to this place. Tommy went along on each of these visits. While Mangal would sit perched on the broken walls, dreaming of the past and wondering about the future that awaited him, Tommy would try—unsuccessfully—to jump into his lap.

V

One day, as the village boys played among themselves and Mangal stood watching from a distance, something strange happened. It is difficult to say what prompted it; were the boys short of one player or did Suresh suddenly feel sorry for Mangal? Whatever his reasons might have been, Suresh decided to include Mangal in his game, especially since no one was likely to find out. Suresh called out, 'Hey, Mangal! Do you want to play?'

Mangal answered, 'No, brother. The master will kill me if he finds out. Nothing will happen to you; you will just shrug and walk away.'

'But who will know, silly? Come on, we are going to play a game of riders. You will be the horse and the rest of us will ride you and make you gallop.'

Mangal was doubtful, 'Will I always be the horse, or will I get a chance to ride too?'

Now this was a difficult question. No one had thought of this. Suresh thought for a minute and then said, 'Who will let you ride on his back? Just think. After all, you are an untouchable, aren't you?'

But Mangal insisted. He said, 'When did I say I am not an untouchable? But it was my mother who fed you on her milk. If you won't let me ride, I won't be the horse. You think you are very clever. You think you can always ride me and I will always be the horse, but I won't.'

Suresh got angry. He shouted, 'You *will* be the horse,' and he ran to catch Mangal. But Mangal ran away. Suresh ran after him but Mangal kept running faster and faster. Suresh tried his best to catch Mangal but he was a fat child and running made him short of breath. He finally stopped and

threatened, 'Come and be the horse, Mangal, or I will beat you so much you will never forget it.'

'You will have to be the horse too.'

'All right, we will also be the horse.'

'No, you will refuse later. First you be the horse, I will ride you and later I will become the horse.'

Suresh had really thought of fooling Mangal. Hearing Mangal's plan, he said to his companions, 'Do you see how cunning he is? He is a lowly sweeper boy, after all!'

Suresh and his friends surrounded Mangal, forced him to kneel and become a horse. Suresh jumped on to his back and began clicking his tongue, 'Come on, horse, come on . . . faster, faster!'

Mangal trotted for some time but soon he began to feel as though his back would break under the weight he carried. Slowly, he straightened his back and wriggled out from beneath Suresh's thighs. Suresh fell with a thud and began to scream and cry loudly.

The sound reached his mother. Whenever Suresh cried, she was the first to hear it. His crying was like the crying of no other child; it sounded like the whistle of a narrow-gauge steam engine. She said to her maid, 'Suresh is crying somewhere. Go and look. Find out what is the matter.'

Meanwhile, Suresh himself appeared, crying and rubbing his eyes. He always came running to his mother whenever something upset him and made him cry. She would give him sweets or dry fruits and wipe his tears. Suresh was eight years old yet he behaved like a foolish child. Too much love had done to his mind what too much food had done to his body.

'Why are you crying, Suresh? Who has hit you?' asked the mother.

'Mangal touched me,' he answered with a sob.

His mother found this hard to believe. Mangal was such a harmless little fellow that it was hard to believe he could do any mischief. But when Suresh began to swear that it was true, she had to believe him. She sent for him and scolded, 'You little wretch, now you have also learnt mischief! How many times have I told you—never touch Suresh! Do you remember, or not? Answer me!'

'I remember,' Mangal answered in a subdued tone.

'Then why did you touch him?'

'I didn't touch him.'

'If you didn't touch him, why is he crying?'

‘He fell down, that is why he is crying.’

The lady gritted her teeth with annoyance. She wanted to slap him but she knew she would have to take a bath later to remove the contamination of touching him. Even if she were to hit him with a stick, she would still have to hold the stick and the contamination could flow from the stick to her hand—like an electric charge—and enter her body. So she had to content herself with shouting as many abuses as she could and then ordered him to go away and never show his face again, or god help her, she would drink his blood! Eating the crumbs from her table had taught him mischief, etc etc.

It wasn't so much wounded self-respect as fear that gripped Mangal at this moment. He quietly picked up his clay pots, tucked the torn sackcloth under his arm, placed the dhoti on his shoulder and went away, crying. He told himself he would never come here again. He would probably die of starvation, but so what? What could be worse than this? What is the point of such a life? There was no other place in the entire village where he could go. Who would give shelter to a sweeper's son? So he went to the ruins of his old home where the memory of those good days could dry his tears. But when he reached there, he started crying helplessly.

Tommy stood beside him and the two friends soon forgot their pain in each other's company.

VI

But with the fading daylight, Mangal's hurt began to lessen. He had known real hunger early on in life. His eyes kept skimming over his empty clay pots. Had he been at his usual spot at Maheshnath's door, by now he would have been given Suresh's leftover sweets. What was there for him to eat here? Dust?

He consulted Tommy, ‘Do you want something to eat, Tommy? I can go to sleep on an empty stomach, but can you?’

Tommy whimpered as though to say, ‘We shall have to face such insults all our lives. If you give up like this, how will you manage for the rest of your life? Look at me— when I am kicked in my stomach, I yelp with pain, but then after some time I return to the same spot, wagging my tail. You and I, my friend, have been made for this purpose.’

Mangal said, ‘You go off and find something to eat for yourself.’

Tommy answered in his doggy language, 'I won't go alone; I shall take you along.'

'I won't go.'

'Then I shall not go either.'

'You will die of hunger.'

'Do you think you will manage to stay alive?'

'No one will mourn me if I die.'

'Same here, brother. That bitch I fell in love with turned out to be unfaithful and is now living with Kallu. I am glad she took her pups with her or my life would have been worse. Who would have cared for five puppies?'

A minute's thought made hunger produce yet another tactic.

'The mistress must be searching for us, won't she, Tommy?'

'Of course. Babuji and Suresh must have eaten by now. The servant would have cleaned their plate of the leftover food and must be calling out for us.'

'There is always a lot of ghee left over on their plates and that sweet stuff—mmm, malai!'

'It will all end up in the garbage dump.'

'Let us see if someone comes looking for us.'

'Why would anyone come looking for us? Are we grand priests? Someone will call out "Mangal, Mangal" and that's it. Then the plates will be emptied near the drain.'

'All right, then, let's go. But I shall stay hidden and if someone doesn't ask for me by name, I shall come away. Is that clear?'

The two set off. They reached Maheshnath's house and stood hiding in the shadows. But Tommy didn't have the patience to wait for very long. He quietly slipped into the house and saw that Maheshnath and Suresh had sat down for dinner. Tommy curled up quietly on the veranda, without making the smallest sound for fear that someone would come after him with a stick.

The servants were talking among themselves. One said, 'There is no sign of Mangal today. Maybe he has run away after the scolding he got from the mistress.'

The other answered, 'It'd be a good thing if he has gone away. The first thing one saw in the morning was the face of that sweeper boy.'

Mangal shrank further into the darkness. Hope sank deeper into the depths of despair.

Maheshnath finished his dinner and rose. A servant washed his hands. He would now smoke his hukka and then go to bed. Suresh would lie beside his mother and fall asleep as she told him a story. Who would spare a thought for poor, hungry Mangal? It had grown quite dark by now, yet no one had asked about him.

For some time Mangal stood there dejectedly, then heaving a long sigh, he turned away to go when he spotted a servant—carrying a leaf plate laden with leftover food.

Mangal stepped out from the shadows into the light. How could he resist this temptation?

The servant said, 'Hey, you! Where have you been? We thought you had gone away. Here, eat this; I was just about to throw it away.'

Mangal answered humbly, 'I have been standing here for a long time.'

'Then why didn't you speak up?'

'I was scared.'

'Okay—here, take this.'

He dropped the leaf-plate on to Mangal's outstretched palms. Mangal looked up at him with eyes brimming with humble gratitude.

Tommy crept out of the house. Both sat beneath the neem tree and ate out of the same leaf-plate.

Mangal stroked Tommy's head with one hand and said, 'See, such is the fire of the stomach! What would we have done if we hadn't got this food that others have thrown as waste?'

Tommy wagged his tail.

'My mother had fed Suresh on her milk.'

Tommy wagged his tail again.

'People say that no one can ever pay the price of a mother's milk, but this is the pay-off I am getting.'

And Tommy wagged his tail yet again.

*Traditionally, the mother is considered 'impure' for the first ten days and so it was quite all right for the untouchable Bhungi to feed her baby. But after the mother had taken a ceremonial bath and purified herself, she become 'pure' again.

Big Brother

My brother was five years older than me, but only three classes ahead. He started studying at the same age as I did but he didn't want to hurry in an important matter such as education. He wanted to build on a strong foundation. So he took two years to do what could be done in one year. If the foundation was not strong how could a building be built to last?

I was younger. I was nine; he was fourteen. To check me and keep an eye on me was his birthright. And decency said that I must follow his command as if it was the Law.

He was studious by nature. He always sat with an open book in front of him. Sometimes, to rest his brain, he would draw pictures of birds, dogs or cats on the margins of his books and notebooks. Sometimes, he would write the same name or word or sentence over and over again. Sometimes, he would write a line of poetry in a beautiful handwriting. Sometimes, he would write things that had neither meaning nor sense. Once, I saw the following written in his copy: Special, Ameena, Brothers-Brothers, Actually, Brother-Brother, Radheshyam, Mr Radheshyam, For One Hour. And after this he had made the drawing of a man. I tried my best to make sense of this riddle but I couldn't. I didn't have the courage to ask him. After all, he was in the ninth standard; I in the fifth. How could I dare to make sense of his writings!

I was not at all interested in studying. Sitting with a book for even one hour made me restless. The first chance I got, I would run away from the hostel and go to the playground and sometimes play with marbles, sometimes fly paper butterflies, and my day would be made if a friend showed up. We would climb up on the roof and take turns jumping off, or swing on the gate and pretend it was a motor car. But the moment I entered the room and saw Big Brother, or Big B's angry face, I would get scared to death. His first question would be: 'Where were you?' The question was always asked in the same tone and my answer was always silence. I don't know why I could never say I had gone out to play. My silence would say

that I accept my crime and Big B would have no other option but to greet me with the following words that showed both his love and anger:

‘If you continue to study English like this, you can go on trying for the rest of your life and you still won’t learn one word. Studying the English language is not a joke; everyone can’t master it. Or else every Tom, Dick and Harry would be a master of English. You have to toil day and night to learn it, and you can never fully learn it either. All sorts of learned men can’t actually write, let alone speak in English. And you are such an idiot that you don’t learn from my example. You can see for yourself how hard I work. And if you can’t see, you are blind and stupid. Every day there is a play or a festival. Have you ever seen me go for even one of them? Every day there is a hockey or cricket match. I never go anywhere near them. I am always studying, yet I end up studying in the same class for two, sometimes even three years. Then, how do you expect to pass despite wasting all your time in fun and games? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in the same class? If this is the way you want to waste your life, you might as well go back home and play gulli-danda. Why are you wasting our poor father’s hard-earned money?’

I would listen to this lecture and start crying. I had no answer. I was guilty as charged. Big B was an old hand at giving lectures. He could say such hard-hitting things, aim such barbed arrows that my heart would break into pieces and my confidence would shatter. Yet I didn’t have the strength for such do-or-die labour. At such times of despair, I would think, ‘Maybe it is best to go back home. Why should I take on something that is beyond my abilities and destroy my life? I am willing to stay illiterate.’ But the very thought of so much hard work made my head spin. In an hour or two, the clouds of despair would part and I would decide to study hard. I would make a timetable. After all, how could I begin work without first drawing up a scheme or a plan? There was no room for games and sports in this timetable. According to this plan, I would get up at six am, wash, eat my breakfast and sit down to study. From six to eight, it was English; eight to nine Maths; nine to nine-thirty History; then eat my mid-day meal and go off to school. I would return from school at half-past three, rest for half an hour, then study Geography from four to five, Grammar from five to six, stroll for half an hour in front of the hostel; English composition from six-thirty to seven; translation from eight to nine after dinner; Hindi from nine to ten; different subjects from ten to eleven; and then go to bed.

But it is one thing to make a timetable, another to follow it. I would break the rules from the very first day. The greenery of the sports field, the sweet breeze that blew there, the joy of running after the football, the pick-and-throw of kabaddi, the speed and sureness of volleyball—all these would pull me in strange and unknown ways. Once on the sports field, I would forget everything else. That murderous timetable, those books that would blind me one day—I would remember nothing. And Big B would get yet another occasion to give his lecture. I began to run from the very sight of him. I would try my best to stay away from his all-seeing eyes. I would enter the room on tiptoe lest he spotted me. The moment he looked in my direction, I could feel my life ebbing out of me. I constantly felt as though a sword dangled above my head. But just as man remains caught up in the affairs of the world even at a time of trouble or death, my interest in fun and games remained unabated despite the scoldings and insults.

II

The yearly exams took place. Big B failed, I not only passed but also stood first in my class. There was now only a difference of two classes between him and me. There was a lot I wanted to tell Big B: ‘What happened to all your hard work? Look at me; I had a lot of fun playing and yet I have stood first in my class.’

But he was so sad that I felt truly sorry for him and the thought of sprinkling salt on his wounds seemed a shameful thing to do. My self-confidence, however, grew—as did my pride. And with it Big B’s awe lessened. I began to take part in fun and games with a greater sense of freedom. I had decided: if he ever tries to give me a lecture I shall tell him what I think. I shall say, ‘What have you gained after all the long hours of labour? Look at me, I played all day and yet I stood first in my class!’ Though I didn’t have the courage to actually say these words aloud, it was clear from my behaviour that Big B’s days of tyrannical rule over me were a thing of the past.

Big B sensed it. He was quite clever in these simple matters. One day, when after playing gulli-danda all morning, I was returning home in time for my meal, Big B was ready and waiting to attack. He pounced on me, ‘I can see that passing this year and coming first in your class has gone to your head. But, my dear brother, remember that many great men have lost

their pride; you are nothing in comparison to them. You must have read about Ravan's fate. What have you learnt from reading about him? Or did you just read without understanding? Simply passing in History is not enough; the real thing is the growth and development of your brain. You must understand whatever you read. Ravan ruled over a large empire. Such kings are called chakravarti kings, or supreme rulers. The English too rule over large parts of the world but they cannot be called chakravarti. Many countries do not accept the supremacy of the English; they remain independent and free. But Ravan was a chakravarti ruler. All other rulers paid him a tax. Even the gods obeyed him. Even the gods of fire and water accepted him as their master. Yet what was Ravan's end? Pride caused him to fall. In the end, there was no one with him. A man may do any wrong but he must not be proud. The day you become proud, your days are numbered.

'You must have read about Satan. He began to believe that there could be no greater believer in God than him. In the end he was pushed out from Heaven and thrown into Hell. The Emperor of Rome too became a victim of pride. He died a beggar. You have merely passed one class and it has gone to your head. Remember, you have not passed because of hard work; it is simply good luck, a matter of chance. But it won't happen every time. In gulli-danda sometimes you get a blind shot; it doesn't make you an expert player. The expert player is one whose shots never go waste. Don't go by the fact that I have failed. When you come to my class you will know how tough it is. When you have to read Algebra and Geometry, the History of England, and remember the names of the kings, all eight Henrys! Do you think it is easy to remember which event took place during which King Henry's rule? If you write Henry VIII instead of Henry VII you lose all your marks. Not even a zero; you get nothing! What do you know about anything? There were dozens of James, another dozen Williams and thousands of Charles. It is enough to make your head spin. They couldn't even think of new names; instead, they kept adding II, IV, V after the same name. I could have told them a million names, had someone asked me.

'And Geometry . . . only god can save you from it! If, instead of a b c, you write a c b you end up losing all your marks. No one ever asks these cruel examiners what is the difference between a b c and a c b? Why do they kill innocent students over pointless, silly things? Whether you eat rice, dal and roti or dal, rice and roti—what is the difference? But do these examiners care? They want students to memorize every word that is written

in the textbooks. And this learning by rote they have called Education. But what is the use of memorizing these pointless things? If you drop that perpendicular over this line, then the base will be double the first line. Ask them what is the advantage or purpose? Whether it is double or half—how does it benefit me? But if you want to pass in the exams you have to remember all these nonsensical details.

‘Or they say—write an essay on Punctuality in two–three pages. You open your copy, pen in hand, lost in thought. Everyone knows that it is good to be punctual, it brings order and discipline in a person’s life, people like a punctual person, it is good for business. But how can you write four pages on this? What is the point of taking four pages to write on something that can be said in one line? I call this stupidity. This is wasting time, not saving it. I think people should say what they have to say as briefly as possible and then get going. But, no, you have to cover four pages with ink, no matter how you do it. What is this if it isn’t cruelty towards students? And to top it all, they say “Write in brief”! Write on Punctuality but take four pages! Wonderful! It is like telling someone to run fast slowly! Does it make any sense? Even a child knows it is silly but not these teachers. They think they are know-alls. You will know how tough it is when you come to my class. You are flying high these days because you have stood first in your class. But you must listen to me. I may have failed but I am older than you. I have more experience of the world than you have. Listen carefully to what I have to say, or else you will regret.’

Fortunately, it was time to go to school or no one knows when that lecture would have ended. My meal seemed tasteless. If I am insulted like this after passing, I wondered, what would be my fate if I fail? I was terrified of the scary picture Big B had painted of the sheer amount of work that had to be done in his class. It is a wonder that I didn’t run away from school after that lecture. But despite all the insults that had been heaped upon me, my disinterest in books remained as before. I never allowed any opportunity to play to slip from my hands. I would read, but very little—just enough to complete the work given to me and save me from the teachers’ scoldings. The confidence I had gained soon disappeared and I went back to living like a guilty thief.

The yearly examinations came around once again and it so happened that I passed once again and Big B failed yet again. I hadn't worked very hard but I don't know how I stood first in my class. I myself was amazed. Big B had tried his level best. He had memorized every word of the syllabus. He would study till ten in the night and then again from four in the morning and from six till nine before leaving for school. Yet he failed. I pitied him. When the results were announced, he burst into tears. My own joy was dimmed. If I had failed too Big B would have been less unhappy but who can undo the doings of Fate.

Now only one class separated Big B and me. An unkind thought arose in my mind: If Big B were to fail yet again, he and I would be in the same class. How would he, then, scold me? But with a great deal of effort I removed the wicked thought. After all, Big B scolded me for my own good. While I hated his lectures when he was delivering them, I knew it was because of his constant preaching that I cleared one class after another, and that too with such good marks.

By now Big B had softened a great deal. Several times, despite finding ample opportunities to scold me, he would hold on to his patience. Perhaps he had realized that he no longer had the right to scold me, or if he had the right then it was much reduced. My wilfulness increased. I began to take unfair advantage of his patience. I began to believe that I would pass—whether I studied or not—because Fate was with me. And so, the little studying I used to do because of Big B's terror stopped. My newest hobby was kite-flying and my entire day would pass in pursuing it. But I still respected Big B. So I would go off to fly kites when he wasn't looking. The various issues relating to kite-flying—how to tie knots expertly, how to cut the strings of competitors' kites, how to enter kite-flying competitions—were dealt with secretly. I didn't want Big B to think that my respect for him had lessened in any way.

One day, close to evening, I was far away from the hostel, running madly after a cut kite. My eyes were glued to the sky and my heart was set on that traveller from the skies that was slowly heading towards the ground as though a heavenly spirit was disinterestedly about to enter a new body. An army of boys, armed with long poles and thorny twigs, was running to catch it. No one was concerned about anything else except the trailing kite. It was

almost as though all of us were flying with the kite through the skies where there were no cars, no trams, no lorries.

Suddenly, I ran into Big B who was perhaps returning from the market. He caught my hand there and then and spoke angrily, 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself—running around with these urchins after a worthless kite? Have you no sense? Don't you know you are no longer in a lower class? You are now in the Eighth Standard, just one class behind me. You must give some thought to your position in life. There was a time when people passed the Eighth Standard and became Deputy Tehsildars. I know so many Middle School Pass who have risen to become top-class Deputy Magistrates and Superintendents. So many of our country's leaders and newspaper editors have passed only the Eighth Standard. Some of the most learned men work under them whereas you—you who are studying in the same Eighth Standard—go running around after kites with a bunch of street urchins! I feel saddened by your thoughtlessness.

'You are intelligent, there is no doubt about it, but what good is intelligence if it destroys our pride in ourselves? You must be thinking—I am only one class behind my elder brother and so he doesn't have the right to say anything to me any more. But you are wrong. I am five years older than you. Even if you and I are studying in the same class—and if I continue to get the same results I shall, no doubt, end up in the same class as you and maybe next year you will leave me to go into the next class—the five-year difference between us shall always remain. Not you, not even god, can remove that difference.

'I am five years older than you and shall always remain so. You can never match the experience I have of life and of this world—not even if you do an MA or a DPhil. and a DLitt. You don't get a sense of right and wrong from books alone; you get it from seeing and understanding the world. Our mother has never studied in any class and our father hasn't studied beyond the Fifth or Sixth Standard. You and I can study everything there is to study in the entire world, but our parents will always have the right to scold and correct us. Not because they have given birth to us, but because they have far more experience of the world and shall always have more experience than us. What sort of government does America have, or how many times did Henry VIII marry, or how many planets are there in the universe—they may not know these things, but there are thousands of other things they know that you and I do not.

‘God forbid, if I were to fall ill today, wouldn’t you panic? You would be able to do nothing except send a telegram to our father. But if our father were here instead of you, he wouldn’t send any telegram to anybody; he would neither worry nor panic. He will first try to understand the ailment and cure it as best as he can; if he doesn’t succeed he will send for a doctor. Forget falling ill, you and I don’t even know how one month’s expenses should be made to last the entire month. Whatever our father sends us each month gets finished by the 20th or the 22nd and we are left with nothing. Our breakfast is stopped. We have to evade the washerman and the barber. Whereas our father has spent less than half of what we spend in a month for the bulk of his life. Not only has he lived well and with dignity but he has supported a large family which includes nine dependents.

‘Look at our Headmaster . . . He has done an MA and that too not from here but from Oxford. He gets a thousand rupees, but who runs his home? His elderly mother! His degree is of no use in this field. He used to run his household on his own earlier but the money would always run short. He was always in debt. Ever since his mother has taken over the reins, it is as though Goddess Lakshmi has entered their home. So, my dear brother, you must get rid of this pride that you have come closer to my class and are, therefore, free to do as you wish. I can’—(raises his hand as if to slap)—‘use this too. You hate my words right now, don’t you?’

In the face of this new argument, I lowered my head with humility. In front of Big B I felt truly small. Real respect for him swelled in my heart. I spoke with wet eyes, ‘No, not at all. Every word you say is true and you have every right to say it.’

Big B clasped me to his bosom and said, ‘I don’t forbid you from flying kites. I too sometimes feel like flying one, but what can I do? If I go astray, how can I protect you? After all, that duty rests on my head.’

By chance, at that very moment, a kite trailed over our heads. Its cut string dangled behind. A bunch of boys was running to catch it. Big B was tall; he jumped and caught hold of the string and began to run madly towards the hostel. I ran after him.

The Shroud

At the door of their hut, father and son sat silently beside a burnt-out fire. Inside, the son's young wife, Budhiya, was in the middle of giving birth to a baby. From time to time, she would let out such a loud, pain-filled scream that father and son would get startled. It was a winter night. Nature slept under a heavy blanket of silence. The entire village lay hidden under a sheet of darkness.

'It looks like she won't make it. You have spent the whole day going in and out—now go in again and take another look,' said Ghisu, the father.

His son, Madhav, answered in an irritated voice, 'If she has to die, why doesn't she get it over and done with? What can I do by looking at her?'

'You are a heartless fellow!'

'I can't see her in so much pain.'

They belonged to a family of chamaars—the lowest among the untouchable castes since their caste dealt with dead animals. And these two had earned a particularly bad name for themselves in the village. Everyone knew that Ghisu would work for one day and take off for the next three days. Madhav was so lazy that if he worked for half an hour, he would stop and smoke his pipe for an hour. So the two hardly ever found any work. As long as there was even a handful of grain in their house, they would not bother to look for work. It was only after they had had to starve for a few days that Ghisu would climb a tree and break off some twigs, and Madhav would sell these as firewood in the market. After this the two would loiter about for as long as the money would last.

There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a village of farmers and for a hard-working man there were lots of jobs to do. But only those who were willing to hire two people to do one man's job gave them work. They were like a pair of sadhus—satisfied with whatever little they had. Being happy came naturally to them.

Theirs was a strange life. Their home had no worldly possessions except for a pair of clay pots. They covered their naked bodies with a few torn

rag. Their lives were free of any worldly cares even though they were heavily in debt. People heaped abuses on them, even beat them, but father and son remained without a care in the world. They were so poor that, sometimes, kind-hearted people lent them some money knowing that they would never get it back. To beat their hunger, they would sometimes steal some peas or potatoes from someone's field and roast them or pull out half-a-dozen stalks of sugar cane to suck at night. Ghisu had led this happy-go-lucky existence for sixty years and, like a dutiful son, Madhav was following in his father's footsteps. If anything, Madhav was proving to be even better and giving an extra shine to his father's name!

The two now sat before the burnt-out fire, roasting the potatoes they had earlier dug from someone's field. Ghisu's wife had died a long time ago. Madhav had got married last year. Ever since his wife had entered their house, she had tried to introduce some order in their disorderly lives and keep their stomachs filled as best as she could. But with her arrival, the father and son had become not just more lazy, but cocky too! If someone wanted to hire them for some work, they would boldly ask for double the normal rate. And now when the poor woman lay dying while trying to give birth to Madhav's child, the two sat waiting for her to die so they could go to sleep in peace and quiet.

Ghisu dug out another potato and spoke while peeling it, 'Go and see how she is. She must be under the influence of some bad spirit, but if we call someone from the village to remove the curse, we will have to pay at least one rupee.'

Madhav was afraid that if he went in to check on his wife, Ghisu would finish off most of the potatoes. So he said, 'I am scared of going in.'

'What are you scared of? I'll be right here.'

'Why don't you go in and see her?'

'When my wife was dying I didn't move from her side for three days. And, just think, she would be ashamed if I saw her lying like that. I have never even seen her face behind the veil, how can I now see her uncovered body? In her condition, she won't be able to keep herself covered. If she sees me she won't be able to thrash about freely.'

'I have been thinking—what will happen if the baby is born? There is no ginger, sugar or oil that one needs on such occasions.'

'Everything will be taken care. Wait till god gives us a baby. The same people who now refuse to give us even one paisa, will call us tomorrow to

give us rupees. I had nine sons and there was never anything in the house, but each time God saw us through somehow.'

In a society where those who worked hard day and night were hardly better off than Ghisu and where those who knew how to take advantage of the poor peasants were rich and powerful, it is no wonder that Ghisu had such views. In a way, Ghisu was more intelligent than the peasants and instead of becoming one more mindless worker, he had decided to become a lazy good-for-nothing gossip. Despite his rags, he was happy. He didn't have to do the backbreaking labour that the other poor people in the village did and no one could possibly take advantage of his simplicity and innocence, for he was neither simple nor innocent!

II

The father and son sat before the dead fire, digging out roasted potatoes and eating them piping hot. They hadn't eaten a thing for two days and now they didn't have the patience to let the potatoes cool. They burnt their tongue several times. After peeling, the outer layer didn't seem very hot but the moment they dug their teeth in, the fiery core would scorch their tongue, throat and palate. It was better to swallow that live-hot coal than let it stay in the mouth for even a second more. Once it reached the stomach, there was enough stuff there to cool it.

And so they sat—swallowing hot potatoes even though the effort made their eyes water.

Suddenly Ghisu remembered the Thakur's wedding that he had attended twenty years ago. That wedding feast was the experience of a lifetime and its memory was as fresh as ever. He said, 'I can never forget that feast! Never have I seen such a feast, nor have I eaten so much ever again. The bride's family served puris to everyone—and I mean everyone. Old and young, everyone stuffed themselves with those puris made in real ghee. Chutney, spicy yoghurt, three different kinds of greens, a curried vegetable, curd, sweets—how can I describe the taste of that food! And no shortage of anything—you could ask for whatever you wanted and eat as much as you wanted. Everyone ate so much that they could not sip even a drop of water. And those who were serving us just went on putting hot puris on our plates.

We would tell them that we didn't want any more, we would even put our hands above our plates to stop them, but they would simply not stop. And after everyone had finally finished and rinsed their mouth, there was betel and cardamom too. But I had eaten far too much to eat a betel leaf; I could barely stand on my feet. I ran towards my bedding and lay down. What a large-hearted man that Thakur was!'

Enjoying the taste of every one of those delicacies in his imagination, Madhav said, 'No one gives such feasts now.'

'Who can give such feasts any more? That was a different time and age. Now everyone thinks of saving money: Don't spend on marriages, don't spend on funerals. Someone ought to ask such people where they are going to hide all the wealth they have hoarded by fleecing the poor. They never think of cutting down on their fleecing; it is only the spending that they want to reduce.'

'You must have eaten about twenty puris.'

'I ate more than twenty puris.'

'I would have eaten fifty!'

'I wouldn't have eaten less than fifty either. I was a strong young man; you are barely half my size.'

After finishing the potatoes, they drank some water and right there, in front of the dead fire, they wrapped themselves in their dhotis and went off to sleep. They looked like two huge coiled pythons.

Budhiya was still moaning.

III

In the morning, Madhav entered the hut and found his wife had turned cold. Flies buzzed around her face and her stony eyes looked upwards. Her body was coated with dust. The baby had died inside her.

Madhav ran to tell Ghisu. The two began to scream and shout and beat their chests. When the neighbours heard their weeping and wailing, they came running and according to custom, tried to comfort them. But this was not the time for showing grief; they had to worry about the shroud and the pyre wood. Money was as scarce in their house as meat in an eagle's nest.

Father and son went to meet the village zamindar. He hated the sight of those two and had, many times in the past, beaten them up with his own hands for stealing or not showing up for work despite promising to do so.

He asked, 'What is the matter with the two of you? Why are you crying? I never see you around; it seems you don't want to live in this village any more.'

Ghisu spoke with his head lowered and his eyes brimming with tears, 'My lord, something terrible has happened to us. Madhav's wife passed away last night. She tossed and turned in pain all night and we sat beside her. We did whatever we could, we gave her medicines, but, to cut a long story short, she left us. Now there is no one left to give us a morsel of food. We are ruined. Our lives are destroyed. You are our lord and master; there is no one else who can make sure she gets a decent cremation. Whatever little we had went towards her care and medicines. Now, if you wish, she can be given her last rites. We have no one else to whom we can turn for help.'

The zamindar was a kind man but to show kindness to Ghisu was like trying to dye a black blanket. Normally the fellow doesn't even show up when you send for him, but now, when he wants something, he has turned up with his clever words, the zamindar fumed. But he also knew that this was not the right time for showing his anger or handing out punishment. Feeling frustrated, he pulled out two rupees and threw them on the ground. But he did not speak one word of sympathy, nor did he look at Ghisu. It was as though he had done his duty and that was all.

Since the zamindar had given two rupees, how could the village moneylenders and merchants refuse? Ghisu knew how to broadcast the fact that the zamindar had given the money. Someone gave two *annas*, someone else gave four *annas*. Within an hour, Ghisu had collected five rupees. He got grain from somewhere, wood from somewhere else. By noon, he and Madhav set off for the market to buy the shroud. Already, a few people had offered to chop some bamboo for the pyre.

The soft-hearted village women who came to take a look at Budhiya's dead body shed a few tears at its helplessness and went away.

IV

Ghisu reached the market and said, 'There will be enough wood to cremate her, Madhav.'

'Oh, yes, we shall have enough wood. All we need is the shroud.'

'Let's go and pick up some cheap material.'

‘Yes, that’s what we should do. It will be dark by the time we carry her for cremation. Who is going to look at the shroud in the night?’

‘What a horrible custom! We may not even have a rag to cover our nakedness during our life, yet we must have a new piece of cloth for a shroud when we die.’

‘The shroud gets burnt along with the corpse, doesn’t it?’

‘Of course. If we had these five rupees when she was alive, we could at least have bought her some medicine.’

They could clearly read each other’s thoughts. So they loitered about the market—stopping at one cloth merchant’s shop after another. They looked at different kinds of cloths—silks and cottons—but found nothing that was to their liking. By the time it was sunset, they found themselves at the door of a shop selling toddy. Without any need for consulting each other, they entered it. Ghisu ordered a bottle, some snacks and fried fish. Father and son sat down and began to drink and eat.

After gulping several cups quickly, they became a little drunk.

Ghisu said, ‘What’s the point of placing a shroud over her? After all, it will get burnt along with her body. It won’t go with her to her next life.’

Madhav looked towards heaven as though asking the gods to be a witness to his sincerity and innocence, and said, ‘It is the way of the world or why would people give thousands of rupees to Brahmins? Who is there to make sure that one gets it back in the next world?’

‘The rich have money to burn, so let them! What do we have?’

‘But what will you say to everyone? Won’t people ask where the shroud is?’

Ghisu laughed and said, ‘We’ll say the money fell from our waistband. We searched all over but we couldn’t find it. They may not believe us but they will again give us the money.’

Madhav laughed at this unexpected good fortune and said, ‘She was a good woman; even in her death she has ensured us a hearty meal.’

They had finished almost half the bottle by now. Ghisu ordered four pounds of puris and chutney, pickles and spicy liver from a nearby shop. Madhav ran to get the food. It cost exactly two-and-a-half rupees. Now they were left with only a few paise.

The two sat stuffing themselves with the puris in the same way that the Lord of the Jungle feeds on a big catch. They had no worries. Small things like what people would say did not matter to them.

Ghisu spoke in a thoughtful tone, 'If she is the direct cause of our happiness, won't god be pleased with her?'

Madhav bowed his head respectfully and agreed, 'Oh, yes! Oh All-Knowing Lord, please take her to heaven. Both of us are praying for her from the depths of our heart. I have never tasted such food ever before as I have today.'

A sudden thought produced a doubt in Madhav's mind. 'Won't we also be going there one day?'

Ghisu did not want to answer such a silly question. He didn't want thoughts of the other world to disturb his present happiness.

'Suppose she asks us there why we didn't give her a shroud, what will we say?'

'We'll tell her to get lost!'

'She will surely ask us.'

'But what makes you think she won't get a shroud? Do you think I am a fool? Do you think I have learnt nothing in the past sixty years of my life? She will get a shroud and a good one too.'

Madhav found this hard to believe. He said, 'But who will give it? You have finished all the money. She won't ask you; she'll ask me. I was the one who married her; I was the one who put sindoor in her hair. She was my wife.'

Ghisu answered angrily, 'She will get her shroud; I am telling you so. Why don't you believe me?'

'But who will give it? Why don't you tell me?'

'The same people who gave it before. Though this time they won't hand us any money.'

The night wore on and more people came into the toddyseller's shop. The level of excitement grew. Someone started singing. Another was busy boasting. Everyone was drunk.

The father and son were still drinking. People were looking enviously at them.

After the two had eaten as much as they could, Madhav gave the leftover puris to a beggar who had been looking at them hungrily. For the first time in his whole life, he felt the pride, pleasure and happiness that comes with giving something to another person.

Ghisu told the beggar, 'Go on, take it, eat your fill and give your blessings. The woman who earned us this food is dead, but your blessings

will reach her. Remember to bless her well; this has been bought with hard-earned money!’

Madhav again looked at the sky and said, ‘She will surely go to heaven and live like a queen there.’

Ghisu stood up and spoke as if he was swimming in an ocean of happiness. ‘Yes, son, she will go to heaven. She never hurt a fly, never gave the smallest trouble to anyone. Even in her death she managed to fulfil our dearest wish. If she won’t go to heaven, who will? These rich, fat slobs who fleece the poor and then wash away their sins by taking a dip in the Ganga river or by offering its holy water in temples?’

Like all drunks, Madhav was happy one minute, sad the next. He said, ‘But she suffered all her life. She experienced so much pain before death took her.’ He put his hands over his eyes and began to sob.

Ghisu tried to comfort him, ‘What is the good of crying? You should be happy that she is free of this world and its cares. She is lucky to have broken free from all bonds.’

With this, both stood up and began to sing. The others turned to look but they were lost in their own world. They sang, danced, hopped, skipped and jumped. They stumbled, fell, picked themselves up and danced some more. Finally, tired and drunk, they fell down.

The Thakur's Well

As Jokhu raised the tumbler of water to his lips, he was overcome by the stink in it. He said to his wife, Gangi, 'What is wrong with this water? Why does it smell so bad? Here I am dying of thirst and you have given me this dirty, smelly water to drink.'

Gangi was in the habit of fetching water from the well every evening. The well was quite far, and it was difficult to make more than one trip every day. But yesterday, when she had filled the water, there had been no smell. How could it smell bad today? She carried the tumbler to her nose; it did smell really very bad. Some animal must have fallen into the well and it was beginning to rot by now, making the water smell bad. She tried to think where else she could draw water.

There was the Thakur's well. But being a high caste, he would never allow an untouchable like her to draw water from his well. He would heap abuses at her from a distance and send her away. The merchant's well was at the far end of the village but no one would let her draw water from there either. There were no other wells in the entire village.

Jokhu had been ill for the past several days. Now, he controlled his thirst for as long as he could, but when it became unbearable, he turned to Gangi and said, 'I can't bear the thirst any longer. Give me that water; I will hold my nose and drink it.'

But Gangi refused to give him the smelly water. His illness would get worse if he drank it—she knew that much. What she didn't know was that bad water could be boiled and made safe. She said, 'How can you drink that water? Who knows what animal has died in it! I will get you some clean water.'

Jokhu looked at her with surprise, 'Where will you get it from?'

'The Thakur and the merchant both have wells. Won't they let me draw even a tumblerful of water?'

'You will get a few broken bones and nothing more. Sit here and be quiet. The Brahmins will shoo you away with a curse, the Thakur will beat

you and the merchant will charge you five times interest on anything he gives you. Who has any sympathy for the poor? We could die tomorrow and they would not care; they would not peep inside our house, let alone extend a helping hand. Will such people let you draw water from their well?’

Jokhu’s words contained a bitter truth. Gangi could see that but still she could not give him that awful smelling water to drink.

II

It was nine o’clock at night. The tired farm labourers had long since fallen asleep. Half a dozen good-for-nothing gossips had collected at the Thakur’s doorway. Since their own lives had no stories of bravery to offer, they were talking about old courtroom dramas. The present topic of discussion was the time when the Thakur had cleverly bribed the police inspector and got off scot-free. Then, they moved on to discussing that other time when the Thakur had managed to get a copy of the lawsuit. The clerks and magistrates had insisted it was impossible to get a copy made. The stakes had been so high—some had asked for fifty rupees, others hundred. The Thakur had managed to lay his hands on a copy of the lawsuit without spending a single *cowrie*. After all, one must know how to get these things done.

Gangi reached the well as the men sat bragging about the Thakur’s past exploits. The dim light of a small oil lamp fell over the well. She crouched in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to make a dash for the well. She thought of the unfairness of her situation: the entire village could draw water from this well. There were no restrictions on anyone except the few unlucky ones like her.

Rebellion rose within Gangi’s heart. How was she inferior and those loudly laughing and gossiping men superior? What was it that set them apart? The sacred thread that the Thakurs wore around their necks? Cheats and bullies . . . that is what they were . . . every single one of them. They stole, they cheated, they put up false lawsuits against each other. It was only the other day that the Thakur had stolen a poor shepherd’s sheep, killed it and feasted on it. And the Pandit’s house was no better than a gambling den. The merchant sold ghee mixed with oil. They knew how to get work out of poor people without paying a single paisa in wages. ‘What makes them

better than us?’ Gangi thought. ‘Mere words don’t make a man superior. We don’t go around praising ourselves in the streets.’

Suddenly, Gangi heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart began to beat hard with fright. If someone saw her here beside the Thakur’s well, she would be beaten and kicked. She picked up her pot and rope and, bending low in the darkness, went to stand in the shade of a huge tree. These men never showed pity, she knew that well enough. They had beaten poor Mangu so cruelly that he had spat blood for months. His ‘crime’ had been that he had refused to work as a labourer for them. And, to add insult to injury, they thought they were superior.

As Gangi stood under the tree, two women came up to the well. They talked as they drew water.

‘They sit down to dinner and order us to fetch fresh water. They don’t even give us enough money to buy a new water jug.’

‘I think men like to order us about when they see us sitting idle.’

‘Yes, they will never even think of picking up the bucket and drawing water themselves. They give an order for fresh water and expect us to run and get it, as though we are their slaves.’

‘But you *are* a slave. You are fed and clothed, but never paid for your labour. You may save a few rupees from your master, but that is all you have. What are you, then, if not a slave?’

‘Don’t tease me, sister. I don’t get a minute to myself. If I worked like this in someone else’s home, I would have led a far more comfortable life and got some gratitude too. Here, I can kill myself working like a slave and no one will care!’

The two women filled their pots and went away. Gangi crept out from the shadows and walked slowly towards the well. The idlers had gone home by now. The Thakur too had shut his door and was, probably, on his way to bed. Gangi drew a sigh of relief. At last, she could do what she had come here to do. The prince who had gone to steal nectar from the gods* could not have shown greater care than Gangi did at this moment. As she crept closer to the well, she began to feel excited, as though victory was close at hand and she would be successful in her mission.

She fastened the rope around the mouth of her pot, then darted a quick, alert look all around her like a soldier waiting to climb the enemy’s fortress under the cover of darkness. She knew that if she was caught red-handed, there would be nothing to save her. With a silent prayer, she gathered her

courage and dropped the pot over the rim of the well. It wobbled a bit on the surface, then went under without a sound. Gangi pulled urgently at the rope and within seconds it reached the top of the well. The strongest man in the village couldn't have pulled that pot faster.

Gangi bent to lift the pot and loosen the rope when suddenly, the Thakur's door flew open. At that moment, the wide open mouth of a lion would have been less fearsome to Gangi.

The rope slipped from her hand. With that, the pot too fell into the water with a loud splash. The sound of water lapping against the pot could be heard.

The Thakur ran towards the well shouting, 'Who is it? Who is there?'

Gangi leapt from the well and ran. She reached home to see Jokhu raising the tumbler of foul-smelling water to his lips.

*According to popular Indian mythology, a prince was asked to go to heaven and steal *amrit*, the nectar that makes the gods immortal and lets them stay forever young.

Idgah

Id has come after a whole month of fasting during Ramzan. The day dawns with a special brilliance. The trees seem greener. The fields look brighter. The sky is a clear blue. And look at the sun! It seems to be sending out a special Id greeting to the world through its gentle, warm light. The village is astir with excitement.

People are getting ready to go to the Idgah. Someone has just found out that his buttons are missing from his kurta; he has gone running to the neighbours to get needle and thread. Others are hurrying to feed the bullocks; it will be late afternoon by the time they return from the Idgah. They have to travel almost six miles on foot and then there will be so many people to meet and greet. There is no way they can return before noon.

The boys are the happiest of the lot. Some have kept just one fast, and that too for half a day, others haven't even done that; but no one can take away their joy in going to the Idgah. Let the elderly keep the fasts; they are happy with their Id! They have been waiting for this day for months. Now they are anxious to reach the Idgah. What do boys have to do with domestic matters? They don't care whether there is milk and sugar at home for the special *seviyan* that shall be made; they only know that they shall eat lots of *seviyan* today. Little do they know why their poor father is running desperately towards Chaudhry Kayam Ali's house. Nor do they know that if the Chaudhry were to turn his face away their Id would turn into a day of mourning. Their little pockets are filled with the treasures of Kuber, the god of wealth. They take out their hoard from the pockets and count every paisa—again and again—and put it safely back.

Mehmood counts—one, two . . . ten, twelve. He has twelve paise. Mohsin has one, two, three . . . eight, nine . . . fifteen. With these countless paise they shall buy countless things— toys, sweets, bugles, balls and god knows what else. The happiest of them all is Hamid: a thin, sickly-looking boy of four or five whose father died last year of cholera and whose mother kept becoming paler and paler till she too died one day. No one knew what

ailed her. She told no one of her troubles, for there was no one to listen to her. She suffered silently and when she could take it no more she quietly departed from this world. Now Hamid sleeps in his grandmother Ameena's lap and he is no less happy. He thinks his father has gone away to earn lots of money and one day he will return with bags of money. And his mother has gone to Allah's house from where she will return with lots of nice things for him. This is enough to make Hamid happy. Hope is a great thing, and there is nothing like the hope of a child. A child's imagination can make a mountain out of a grain of rye.

Hamid has no shoes on his feet. On his head, he wears a tattered old cap whose gold lace has turned black with age. But he is happy. When his father returns with bagfuls of money and his mother with goodies, he will get everything his heart hungers for. Then he will see how Mehmood, Mohsin, Noore and Sammi can match his wealth.

Poor, unfortunate Ameena is sitting at the door of her humble home and crying. It is Id today and she does not have a grain of food in her house. Had her son, Abid, been alive would Id have come and gone like this? She is lost in the darkness of despair and hopelessness. Who had called this good-for-nothing Id? There is no use for it in this household! But Hamid has no such cares. He is unconcerned by such dark thoughts. There is light inside him and brightness in the world outside. Let misfortune come with all its strength; it will face defeat in front of Hamid's happy face.

Hamid enters the house and tells his grandmother, 'Don't be scared, Amma, I shall be the first to return. Don't be scared at all.'

Ameena's heart is twisting in her chest. The other boys are going with their fathers; Hamid has no one except Ameena. Can she let him go alone? What if he were to get lost in that crowd? No, no, how can she let him go alone? He is a little boy, after all, how can he walk six miles? He will get blisters on his feet. He doesn't even have shoes on his feet. If she were to go along she could pick him up every now and then and carry him. But if she goes, who will cook the *seviyan*? If she had enough money, she could have bought the necessary ingredients on the way back. But since she has no money she has to depend on borrowing. It will take her hours to collect everything.

The other day she had stitched clothes for Fahiman for which she had been paid eight *annas*. She had been holding on to those eight *annas* for dear life for this Id. But yesterday the milkman's wife had insisted on

getting the money due to her. Poor Hamid, he needs to be given two-paise worth of milk at the very least. After paying for the milk, Ameena is left with only two *annas*—three paise in Hamid's pocket and five in Ameena's purse. That is all they have, and it is Id today! Allah alone is their saviour. The washerwoman, the barber's wife, the sweepress, the bangle-seller—they will all come to greet her on the occasion of Id. They will all expect their share of *seviyan*, and they will not be happy with a little. How will poor Ameena escape from them? And why should she? Id comes once a year. It is the time to give to the poor and to take their blessings. May god keep her Hamid safe. This day too shall pass somehow.

II

The crowd left the village. And Hamid left with a group of boys. Sometimes they ran ahead and waited under a tree for the others to catch up. Why were the elders walking so slowly? Hamid had wings on his feet. How could he tire? They had reached the outskirts of the city. The orchards of the rich lined both sides of the road. They were enclosed by brick walls. Inside, there were trees laden with mangoes and litchis. Every now and then, a boy picked up a pebble and aimed at a mango. The gardener guarding the trees came out shouting abuses. The boys had run off by then and were busy having a good laugh at fooling the gardener.

Tall buildings began to appear. There was the court, and there the College, and that was the Clubhouse. How many boys must be studying in such a large College! They were not boys; they were men! They were grown-up; they even had big moustaches, and yet they were still studying! God knew how long they would keep studying and what they would do with all their studies. There were a couple of big boys in Hamid's madarsa; they were the good-for-nothing-types who ran away from work and were beaten every day. Surely, those sort of people must be ending up here. All sorts of magic were performed at the Clubhouse. They said the skulls of dead men ran about and many great magical feats were performed, but no one was allowed to go inside. The sahebs come here in the evenings to play—some had big moustaches and beards—and some came with their memsahebs who played as well. Try handing a bat to our mothers, they won't even know how to hold one. They will take one swipe with it and fall over!

Mehmood said, 'My Ammi jaan's hand will start shaking if she tries, I swear!'

Mohsin said, 'But she can pound kilos of wheat and you are saying her hand will tremble if she holds a bat! She draws countless pots of water from the well. My buffalo drinks at least five pots of water. Let one of these mems draw even one pot of water from a well, then they will know!'

Mehmood said, 'But our mothers don't run about and play.'

'They don't play,' Mohsin agreed, 'but just the other day when my cow got loose and ran into the Chaudhry's field, my mother ran so fast that even I couldn't keep pace with her!'

They kept walking. Shops selling sweetmeats began to appear beside the road. The shops were brightly decorated. Who could eat so many sweets? Each shop had kilos of sweets. One boy said, 'People say ghosts come at night and buy all the sweets. My father says a man appears at midnight, gets all the sweets weighed and pays real money for them.'

Hamid found this hard to believe. He said, 'Where would the ghost get real money?'

Mohsin said, 'There is no shortage of money for ghosts. They can get into any treasure house they want. Even iron doors can't stop them. They have lots of diamonds and jewels. If they are happy with someone, they shower them with jewels. They will be sitting here right beside you one minute, and five minutes later they would have reached Calcutta.'

Hamid asked, 'These ghosts must be huge creatures?'

Mohsin answered, 'A single ghost can reach up till the sky. If he stands on the earth, his head touches the sky. But, when he wants, he can get into a pot.'

Hamid asked, 'How does one please them? If someone were to tell me the mantra to please a ghost, I would do it immediately.'

Mohsin said, 'I don't know how it is done, but Chaudhry saheb has several ghosts under his control. If something is stolen, Chaudhry saheb knows how to find it and also who stole it. The other day Jumrati's calf got lost. He looked all over for three days without any luck. Then he went to Chaudhry saheb who told him instantly that the calf was to be found in the animal shed, and there it was! The ghosts come and tell him what is happening in the whole world.'

Now Hamid understood why Chaudhry saheb had so much money and fame.

They kept walking. There was the Police Line. This was where the constables paraded. All night long they went and round keeping guard, or else there would be so many thefts. Mohsin countered, 'These constables don't guard! They are the ones who get all the thefts done. All the thieves and dacoits in the city are known to them. They tell the thieves to commit thefts in one neighbourhood while they themselves go to another neighbourhood and pretend to stand guard. And that is why these people are so rich. My uncle is a constable. He earns 20 rupees every month as salary, yet he sends 50 rupees home every month. I had once asked him where he got so much money from. And he had laughed and said, "Son, god gives it." And then he said, "I only take that much which won't bring me a bad name and won't cause me to lose my job."'

Hamid asked, 'If these people get the thefts done, how is it that they never get caught?'

Mohsin pitied such innocence. He said, 'Who can catch them, you fool? They are the ones who catch people. But god punishes them. Ill-gotten gains bring no good. A few days ago, my uncle's house caught fire. He lost everything; not one vessel was spared. For several days he had to sleep under a tree. Then he took 100 rupees on loan from somewhere and bought pots and pans for the house.'

Hamid said, 'A 100 is more than 50.'

'Obviously. If 50 rupees fill one bag, then 100 rupees fill two bags.'

The houses were closely packed now. Crowds of people could be seen going towards the Idgah. Each person was dressed in bright, colourful clothes. Some were travelling in horse-drawn wagons, others rode in motor cars. Everyone was bathed in the sweet scent of *ittr*; everyone was filled with excitement. The small group of villagers, unaware of being in any way different from others, was lost in their own world of patience and contentment. For the children in that group, everything about the city was strange. Their eyes were glued to the things around them. Even the persistent sound of the horn could not break the spell. Hamid was so intent on looking around that he nearly got run over by a car.

Suddenly, they saw the Idgah. A dense cluster of tamarind trees gave shade. The floor was pucca and covered with a mat. The lines of the faithful stretched far beyond the mat-covered floor. Those who came in late took their place in the last rows. If there was no space left in the front rows, even the high and mighty stood at the back. Everyone is equal in the eyes of

Islam. The villagers too performed the ritual ablutions called *wuzoo* and took their place in the back row. Everything looked so beautifully organized and orchestrated. Lakhs of heads bent down together. And then they rose simultaneously. The mass of people bent, then sat with their knees folded behind them in perfect accord. This action was repeated several times. It looked as though lakhs of electric bulbs were switched on, then off, simultaneously. It was a wonderful sight to behold. It filled the onlooker's heart with pride, respect and joy. All these people here seemed to be strung together on a single thread of brotherhood.

III

The prayer ended. People began to embrace each other. And then the attack began on the shops selling sweets and toys. The group of villagers was in no way less excited than the children. Look, there! There is the swing! You can ride it for one paisa. One minute you will feel you are climbing up to the sky, the next minute you will feel you are falling to the ground. Look there! There is the spinning wheel! And wooden elephants, horses, camels hanging from the carousel. You can enjoy twenty-five rounds for one paisa. Mehmood, Mohsin, Noore and Sammi sit astride these wooden animals. Hamid stood some distance away. He had only three paise. He couldn't give away one-third of his treasure for a few minutes of pleasure.

The boys got off the carousel. Now they were going to buy toys. There was a long line of toy shops. You could get all sorts of toys—the soldier and the village girl, the king and the lawyer, the water carrier and washerwoman and the sadhu. They were so beautiful and lifelike, as though they would speak any minute. Ahmad bought a soldier, dressed in khaki uniform and red turban, carrying a gun on his shoulder. It looked as though it had just come from a parade. Mohsin liked the water carrier. Its waist was bent under the weight of the water bag. It held the mouth of the water bag in one hand. It looked so happy. Perhaps it was singing a song. It looked as though any minute it would start pouring water from its water bag. Noore had fallen in love with the lawyer. There was such intelligence on its face! It was dressed in a black gown over a long white coat with a gold watch hanging on a gold chain from its front pocket. It held a legal file in one

hand and looked as though it had just come after arguing a case in a court of law. The toys were worth two paise each. Hamid had only three paise; how could he buy such expensive toys? These toys would shatter into small pieces if they were to fall from his hands. The tiniest splash of water would make their colour run. What would Hamid do with such toys? What good were they for him?

Mohsin said, 'My water carrier will fetch water twice a day, morning and evening.'

Mehmood said, 'And my soldier will guard my home. If a thief comes, he will fire at him with his gun.'

Noore said, 'My lawyer will fight all my cases.'

Sammi said, 'My washerwoman will wash my clothes every day.'

Hamid found fault with the toys. 'They are made of clay. They will shatter the minute they fall.' But he also looked at them with envious eyes. How he wished he could hold one in his hands for a few minutes. Unthinkingly, he stretched his hand out, but boys are not so giving—especially with a new toy! Poor Hamid was left eyeing them enviously.

The sweet shops came after the toy shops. Someone bought rewri, another gulab jamun, yet another chose sohan halwa. Everyone was enjoying the treats—everyone except poor Hamid. The poor thing had only three paise. He looked on with hungry eyes.

Mohsin said, 'Hamid, come and take this rewri. See, it smells so nice!'

Hamid was a bit doubtful. He knew it was a cruel joke; Mohsin was never generous. Still, he went up to Mohsin. Mohsin plucked a rewri and pretended to give it to Hamid. Hamid stretched his hand to accept it, but Mohsin snatched it back and popped it in his own mouth. Mehmood, Noore and Sammi clapped their hands and laughed loudly. Poor Hamid looked sheepish.

Mohsin said, 'This time I shall give you one, I swear on Allah. Here, take it.'

Hamid answered, 'Keep it. Do you think I don't have money?'

Sammi said, 'But you only have three paise; what can you buy with that?'

Ahmad said, 'Come and take some gulab jamun from me; Mohsin is being naughty.'

Hamid said, 'Sweets aren't supposed to be good for us; the books say so.'

Mohsin said, 'I am sure in your heart you are thinking: "I will eat them if I get them!" Why don't you take out your money?'

Mehmood said, 'I understand his cleverness. He will buy things when we have finished all our money and eat them while making us look on greedily.'

After the sweet shops, there were some shops selling metal things and others selling fake jewellery. There was nothing here to interest the boys. They moved on, but Hamid stood at an iron shop. He could see several iron tongs on display. His grandmother didn't have a tong. She invariably burnt her fingers while taking the roti off the fire. How pleased she would be if he were to buy her a tong. And she would never burn her fingers again. Moreover, there would be something of use in the house. What good are toys? Nothing but a waste of money! They give only momentary happiness. After some time you don't even look at them. Or else they break by the time you reach home. The tong, on the other hand, is a most useful thing. It helps you take the rotis off the pan and cook them directly over the fire. If someone comes to ask you for some live coals, you can pick them up from the fire. Poor Amma never has the time to go to the market to buy such things, nor does she have the money. She burns her hand every day.

Hamid's friends had gone ahead. They had stopped beside a sherbet stall and were drinking sherbet. Look, how greedy they are! They bought so many sweets but did not give me even one! And then they ask me to play with them! Or do things for them! Now if they ask me to do anything I will say: Go and eat more sweets and get sick and greedy. They will get sores on their tongues and get a taste for eating out. They will steal money and get beaten up by their fathers. After all, the books don't have false things written in them. I won't fall ill. Amma will see the tong and run to take it from my hand. She will give me thousands of blessings and show it to the neighbourhood women. Everyone in the village will talk about it. Everyone will say Hamid is a good boy. And these boys? Who will praise them, or give blessings? The blessings of your elders go straight to Allah and are heard instantly. I don't have money. That is why Mohsin and Mehmood bully me so. I shall also bully them now. Let them eat their sweets and play with their toys. I shall not eat their sweets, nor be bullied by them. I may be poor but I don't go asking anybody for anything. After all, one day my parents will return. Then I shall ask these boys how many toys they want from me? I shall give baskets full of toys to each one of them and teach

them how to share with friends. Not buy one-paisa-worth of rewri and tease others while eating it all alone! They shall laugh at my tongs. Let them!

He asked the shopkeeper, 'How much for the tongs?'

The shopkeeper looked at him and finding no grown up with the boy said, 'It's of no use to you.'

'Is it for sale or not?'

'Why wouldn't it be for sale? Why else would I bring it here?'

'Then why don't you tell me: How much does it cost?'

'It will cost six paise.'

Hamid's heart sank.

'Tell the final price.'

'The final price is five paise—take it or leave it.'

Hamid gathered all his courage and asked, 'Will you take three paise?'

Saying this, he walked on, fearing that the shopkeeper would taunt and abuse him. But the man did nothing of the sort; instead he called Hamid back and gave him the tong. Hamid put the tong against his shoulder as though it was a gun and began to march proudly towards his friends. He was ready to hear their criticisms.

Mohsin laughed and said, 'Why have you bought a pair of tongs, you fool? What will you do with it?'

Hamid threw his tong on the ground and said, 'Try throwing your water carrier down and watch it break into little pieces.'

Mehmood said, 'But a tong isn't a toy!'

Hamid retorted, 'Why not? Put it on your shoulder, it becomes a gun. Hold it in your hand, it becomes a fakir's instrument. If I want I can use it like a musical instrument. With one touch, it can break all your toys, whereas your toys can't do a thing to my tong. My tong is my brave lion!'

Sammi had bought a small tambourine. Impressed by the tong, he said, 'Will you exchange it with my tambourine?'

Hamid looked at the tambourine with displeasure and said, 'My tong can burst your tambourine's belly, if it wants. After all, what is it? Nothing but a bit of animal skin pasted to make a *dub-dub* sound. A little bit of water can destroy it. My brave tong can survive fire, water, storm and hail.'

Everyone was attracted by the tong, but they had spent all their money. Moreover, they had left the shops far behind. It was already nine; the sun was getting hotter and everyone was in a hurry to get back home. Even if they ask their father for more money, they won't be allowed to buy tongs!

Hamid is a clever little fellow! Now we know why he kept his money safe for so long!

IV

The boys were split into two camps. Mohsin, Mehmood, Noore and Sammi were on one side and Hamid was all alone on the other. A battle of wills began. Sammi changed his mind and joined the other camp. Mohsin, Mehmood and Noore were two–three years older than Hamid but they couldn't match Hamid's wits. He had the strength of justice and the power of arguments on his side. There was clay on one side, iron on the other. One is breakable, the other unbreakable. If a lion were to show up at this minute, the water carrier would melt in fright, the soldier would drop his gun and run away, the lawyer would be so frightened he would hide under his robe and roll on the ground, but this pair of tongs—it would bravely pounce on the lion and gouge its eyes out.

Mohsin tried his best, then came up with the following argument: 'But no matter how hard it tries, it can't fill water.'

Hamid stood the tongs upright and said, 'It will give one rap to the water carrier and the water carrier will go running to fetch water.'

Mohsin accepted defeat. But Mehmood said, 'If your tong gets arrested, it will be handcuffed and brought to the court. Then it will have to fall at the lawyer's feet.'

Hamid had no answer to this powerful argument. He said, 'But who will come to arrest my tong?'

Noore answered proudly, 'My soldier will, with his gun!'

Hamid made a face and said, 'This poor thing will try and arrest my brave lionheart? All right, let's put them together in a wrestling match. Your soldier will take one look at my tong and run away, forget making an arrest!'

Mohsin thought of a new form of attack, 'Your tong will burn its face every day in the fire.'

He had thought Hamid would have no answer. But that didn't happen. Hamid came up with an instant answer, 'Only the brave jump into the fire. Your soldiers, lawyers and water carriers can't do that. Only the bravest of the braves can jump into the fire.'

Mehmood tried once again. 'The lawyer will sit on a table and chair, while your tong will lie on the kitchen floor.'

This argument put new life in Sammi and Noore. What a sensible thing to say! What can a pair of tongs do except lie about on the kitchen floor?

When Hamid could think of no suitable answer right away, he resorted to strong-arm tactics. He said, 'My tong will not lie on the kitchen floor; it will go and throw the lawyer off his chair and stuff his law into his stomach!'

This had the desired impact on his audience, even though that bit about stuffing the law in the lawyer's belly made no sense. The three warriors on the other side stared. Law was something that people spouted, not something that could be stuffed inside their stomachs. Still, the newness of the argument won them over. Hamid was the undisputed warrior in this battle of words. Mohsin, Mehmood, Noore and Sammi had no objection in accepting the fact that his tong was the bravest of the braves.

Hamid got the respect that the winner receives from the defeated. They had spent three to four *annas*, yet bought nothing of any use. But Hamid had made his mark with just three paise. He was right: What good are toys? They break. Hamid's tong will last forever.

Terms of truce began to be offered. Mohsin said, 'Give me your tong for some time; you can play with my water carrier.'

Mehmood and Noore offered their toys too.

Hamid had no objections to these peace offerings. The tong went from one pair of hands to another, and one by one the toys were given to Hamid. They were such pretty toys!

Hamid consoled the defeated party. 'I was only teasing you. How can this poor iron tong compete with your toys?'

But these words of consolation brought no satisfaction to Mohsin's party.

Mohsin said, 'But no one will give us blessings for these toys.'

Mehmood said, 'Forget blessings, we shall be given a beating. Amma will say: "Could you find nothing except these clay toys in the entire fair?"'

Hamid had to accept that no one could be as pleased at the sight of the toys as his grandmother would be by the tong. Three paise were all he had and he had not the slightest regret about the manner in which he had spent his money. Especially now that his tong had been declared the bravest of the braves and the undisputed king of toys.

Mehmood grew hungry on the way. His father gave him bananas to eat. Mehmood shared them only with Hamid. The other boys could only look on. Such was the miraculous effect of the tong!

V

Excitement ran through the village by eleven o'clock: People had returned from the fair! Mohsin's younger sister ran to grab the water carrier from his hand. She jumped with joy, the water carrier fell to the ground and broke. This led to a bitter fight between the brother and sister. Both cried. Their mother heard the commotion, scolded them and gave them both two slaps each.

Noore's lawyer found a more honourable end befitting an eminent person such as a lawyer. A lawyer can't sit on the floor or in a wall niche. After all, due respect must be paid to his high station. Therefore, two nails were dug into the wall. A wooden plank was balanced on them. A paper carpet was laid on the plank. And there sat the lawyer like a king sits on his throne. Noore began to fan him with a handheld fan. After all, a lawyer is used to electric fans and cool *khus* mats in the court. He had to be fanned here too, lest the heat of the law got to his brain! Noore fetched a weed fan and began to fan the lawyer. God knows, whether it was the current of air caused by the fanning or a slight touch from the fan itself, but the lawyer fell to the ground from his high pedestal. There was a great mourning and finally the broken bits of the lawyer were thrown on the garbage heap.

Mehmood's soldier was still left. He was given charge of guarding the village. But a soldier is no ordinary thing that he can walk on his own feet. He would go about on a palanquin! A basket was brought. A few old red rags were spread inside it. The soldier rested on them. Noore picked up the basket and began to go round and round his house. His two younger brothers trailed behind him, shouting, 'All you who sleep, stay awake, stay awake!' Mehmood stumbled and fell. The basket fell down and the soldier too came tumbling down and broke its leg. Mehmood discovered what a good doctor he could be! He stuck the leg back with a bit of gum from the gular tree but the moment the soldier got to his feet, the leg gave way again. When this operation proved unsuccessful, it was decided that the other leg

must be broken too. Now, at least the soldier could sit in peace in one place; with one leg he could neither walk nor sit. From a soldier it became a hermit. It would keep guard from one place only. Sometimes, it could pose as a god too. Its turban was scratched away so it could become whatever one wanted it to be. Sometimes it was used as a measuring weight in a weighing scale!

Now listen to Hamid's tale. Ameena had come running out when she had heard his voice. She pulled him in her lap and began kissing him. Suddenly, she spotted the tong in his hands and stopped.

'Where did this come from?'

'I bought it.'

'For how much?'

'I gave three paise for it.'

Ameena wailed with disbelief. What a silly, innocent child! It is almost noon and he hasn't eaten or drunk a thing. And what has he bought? A pair of tongs!

'Could you find nothing else to buy in the entire fair?'

Hamid answered guiltily, 'Your fingers get burnt when you take the rotis off the fire; that's why I bought it.'

In an instant, the old lady's anger turned into love, and not the sort of love that can be boldly expressed through words. It was a silent, mute love, solid yet filled with the nectar of sweetness. She was amazed at the child's goodness, intelligence and self-control. He had thought of buying something for her when all the other children were buying sweets and toys! How had he controlled himself? Even there, in the fair, he was only thinking of his old grandmother! Ameena's heart overflowed with joy.

And then a strange thing happened. Stranger than Hamid's tong. Young Hamid had played the role of a much older man. Now old Ameena turned into a child. She began to cry. She spread the corners of her dupatta wide and continued blessing him as big drops of tears fell from her eyes. Hamid could not understand the strange change in his grandmother.

Translator's Note

Premchand died in 1936. Yet seven decades after his death his stories still speak to us. Some might seem a little 'preachy' or moralistic to modern readers, even sentimental, but they touch us in a way that cannot be ignored. They appeal to all that is good and decent in us; all that is moved by exploitation, injustice and intolerance. It is this quality that single-handedly makes Premchand *relevant* to readers today. Premchand's greatness also lies in the fact that he does not merely tell a story or present a picture of human tragedy or hold up a mirror to society; he tries to find solutions to the social ills he describes. If you look carefully for the clues, you can find them, sometimes hidden between the lines.

This selection has been made especially for young readers of the age group twelve to fifteen years. While it is true that Premchand wrote many stories either about children or suitable for children, in putting together this collection I did not consciously set out to collect *only* children's stories. My intention here is to introduce you to the world of Premchand that is actually very much like the world you live in. As you read these stories, you will be shocked and surprised to spot the similarities. Greed, corruption, exploitation, honesty, dishonesty, poverty—they exist in some form or the other in every age and in every world. Some of you may have older relatives such as Kaki at home, though you may not be as beastly to her as her family is. Most of you have no doubt, at some point or the other, known the terror of examinations, as poor Bade Bhai Saheb (Big Brother) does, though you may or may not have flunked as many times as him! You may have experienced double standards and felt the pain that comes with knowing that life can sometimes be unfair—as Gangi, Halku and Mangal do in these pages.

Translating Premchand is not without its pitfalls. What is perfectly acceptable in the Urdu/Hindi original can sound bungling, awkward or plain awful in English. Faithfulness to text at the cost of readability can be a foolhardy thing. Just as sacrificing closeness to the original merely in order to gain more 'acceptability' from the modern reader—in this case young readers—too can be a tricky business. I have tried, therefore, to keep the language simple, the sentences short and crisp. The footnotes and Glossary

will help to clear any doubts you might have and shed more light on words you may not be familiar with.

I sincerely hope you will not be depressed or disheartened by these stories. I hope you will appreciate—as I have learnt after reading Premchand over and over again—that good and bad exist side by side. The world has never been empty of kind people, of those who think of others, and those who love unquestioningly. The orphan Hamid who chose a pair of iron tongs for his grandmother instead of sweets and toys for himself, little Ladli who set aside her share of puris for old Kaki, Pandit Alopideen who showed generosity for a fallen opponent, Jhuri who loved his oxen as though they were his children—help to restore our faith in the goodness of human beings.

December 2006 Rakhshanda Jalil

Rakhshanda Jalil works as Media and Cultural Coordinator at Jamia Millia Islamia. She is the translator of a collection of short stories by Premchand entitled The Temple and the Mosque (Harper Collins, 1992); a monograph on Urdu satirist Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqui (Sahitya Akademi, 1995); Urdu Stories (Srishti, 2002); Lies: Half Told (Srishti, 2002), Black Borders (Rupa & Co. , 2003); Through the Closed Doorway (Rupa & Co. , 2004); Circle and Other Stories (Rupa & Co. , 2004); essays on the lesser-known monuments of Delhi called Invisible City (Niyogi Publishers, forthcoming); and a collection of Manto's short stories (Roli Books, forthcoming). She has also co-authored, along with Prof Mushirul Hasan, a history of the Jamia called Partners in Freedom (Niyogi Publishers, 2006).



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AUTHOR FILE

NAME: Dhanpat Rai Srivastava; he was called Nawab at home

BORN: 31 July 1880 in Lamhi near Varanasi, UP

MARRIED: Twice; the second time to a child widow, Shivrani Devi

CHILDREN: Sripat Rai, Amrit Rai and Kamla Devi Srivastava

DIED: 8 October 1936

LIVED: Mainly in and around Varanasi and Allahabad; also a short sojourn in Bombay

What were Premchand's growing up years like?

Premchand's father, Munshi Azaayab Lal, worked in the postal department. Premchand's mother died when he was only seven years old. His father married again, but he too died when Premchand was fourteen.

Premchand's early education was in a madrasa, under a maulvi, where he learnt Urdu. Soon after he completed his schooling (it was called matriculation) he started working as a schoolteacher on a monthly salary of Rs 18. He got married for the first time at the age of fifteen. The marriage did not work out, and later in life he stood up against orthodoxy and married a child widow.

Why did he use a pseudonym?

Premchand's first short stories were written in Urdu, under the name Nawabrai. In 1910, his anthology of stories *Soz-e-Watan* (Dirge of the Nation) was labelled seditious by the British. His books were burned and his writings banned. After the ban, he switched to writing in Hindi under the name of Premchand.



What books did he write?

Fluent in both Hindi and Urdu, Premchand wrote over 300 short stories, a dozen novels and two plays. His first stories were written in Urdu and '*Panch Parmeshwar*' (Five Gods), published in 1916, was his first story in Hindi. The novel *Godan* (1936), his magnum opus, is a vivid account of a helpless peasant, the exploitation by landlords, and the problems of untouchability. His other important novels are *Premashrama* (1918), *Sevasadan* (1918), *Rangabhumi* (1925), *Nirmala* (1928), *Gaban* (1931) and *Karmabhumi* (1932).

What did he write about?

Premchand was a pioneer of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction. He wrote about the daily concerns of ordinary people trying to eke out an existence in the face of overwhelming odds. His short stories were mostly set in villages and mirrored real-life problems like untouchability, exploitation, the condition of women and poverty. Some of his novels have urban middle-class settings, and talk about issues like corruption, prostitution, the condition of widows, and old age.

Premchand did away with fantasy or religious themes in his writings, and instead brought realism to Hindi literature. His use of Hindustani, the language spoken by ordinary people, rather than the Sanskritized Hindi of earlier literary works, found him a wide readership. He had a deep understanding of the problems in the lives of the common people, and was able to write about abject poverty sympathetically since it was an experience he was familiar with. He is considered a secular icon, straddling the Hindu and Muslim worlds.



What else did Premchand do, apart from writing?

Premchand started working as a schoolteacher soon after completing his studies. He worked as a deputy inspector of schools in the United Provinces, or present-day Uttar Pradesh. In 1921, influenced by Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation, he quit his job and decided to spread the message of freedom in the country. He became the manager of a printing press. He also published and edited two literary and political journals *Jagran* and *Hans*. For a time, he also worked as a scriptwriter for films, in Bombay.

How was his writing received in his lifetime?

Premchand was called the 'Upanyas Samrat', or Emperor of Novels, by the readers of north India. However, his writing was not much known outside the north Indian Hindi-speaking areas and he always remained hard up for finances. He moved to Bombay briefly, in order to write for the movies, but he did not like it there much and left. In April 1936, towards the end of his life, he became the chairman of the All-India Conference of Indian Progressive Writer's Association at Lucknow.



THE INDIA PAGES

THE CASTE SYSTEM

There are various theories of how the caste system originated. One theory says it was a division of society on the basis of Varna, or colour, when a distinction was made between the fair-skinned Aryans and darker-skinned non-Aryans. Another theory says it was a way to divide society according to the professions of people. The caste system got more and more rigid with the passage of time and people at the bottom of the caste ladder were exploited in every way.

In modern times there have been many attempts to rid society of divisions based on caste, but they have not been all successful. Forms of discrimination still exist, and there are many areas in the country where untouchables are not allowed to enter places of worship or are made to live separately from other communities. News of atrocities against those of lower castes, and caste wars are still fairly common in today's India.

THE SALT TAX

A tax on salt was first imposed by the East India Company in the eighteenth century. The British government continued to keep the tax in place as it was a great source of revenue. According to the law, the sale or production of salt by anyone but the British government was a criminal offence. Salt was also regularly imported from England and the import duty on it was very low. Only the British government could fix the price at which salt could be sold in the country. This price was usually quite high and caused a great deal of hardship to the poor. It also allowed underhand dealings in the salt trade to flourish.



In 1930, Gandhiji declared he would break this law as a way of flagging off the civil disobedience movement. He marched from Sabarmati ashram in Gujarat to Dandi, 240 miles away, where on 6 April 1930, he produced salt. That day, all over the country, freedom fighters did the same, and the freedom movement gained a new momentum.



SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- ★ Kaki is an old relative abused by her own family. Have you ever seen this happen to someone around you?
- ★ In a number of stories in this collection, humans have a closer relationship with animals than with other men and women. Do you have a pet? Would you consider your pet a closer friend than your best friend?
- ★ In 'The Salt Inspector', Premchand creates a story around corruption, which is still rampant in India. What examples of corruption do you see in the world around you?
- ★ Imagine you are from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and have been called in to check out Gaya's farm. What would you write in your report?
- ★ In 'Big Brother' there is a list of all the things Big Brother has to study. Do you think the subjects you are taught in school have a relevance to your life? What are the subjects and issues that you want to study?
- ★ In 'Idgah', Hamid truly got into the spirit of Id by buying something useful for his grandmother rather than a toy or sweets for himself. Do you think we remember this spirit when we spend money shopping during festivals like Diwali and Christmas?



GLOSSARY

anna: a coin equal to one sixteenth of a rupee; it was in use till September 1955

Babu: a respectful form of address for an educated or distinguished person; also used for a clerk or government servant

bhog: offering of food made to the gods

bhaat: bard or professional singer

bigha: a measure of land equal to roughly five-eighth of an acre

Chait: the first month of the Hindu year according to the lunar calendar corresponding with March–April

chamaar: a leather-worker, tanner, shoemaker; one belonging to the community of leather-workers

charas: a resinous preparation of hemp (cannabis)

chakravarti: ruler of a wide region or country, a mighty or supreme king or emperor

choker: husk of wheat, barley

cowrie: a small shell, formerly in use as a barter token of very low value, less than a paisa; used also to mean either a very small amount of money or something of little importance

ganja: leaves, flower heads or buds of the hemp plant (cannabis sativa) used as an intoxicant

gulab jamun: a type of sweet, round balls of sweetened dough immersed in a sticky-sweet syrup

gular: a type of ficus tree



gulli-danda: a game involving hitting a short stick or peg with a longer stick

gur: unrefined sugar made from sugarcane juice, either shaped in round discs or found as loose clods

halwa: a traditional Indian sweet

hukka: hubble-bubble or plain pipe

Idgah: A place where Muslims offer special prayers on the occasion of Id

ittr: a perfume or essence

Jamadar: a junior officer in the police force during British times; the rank is now abolished, and the juniormost rank is that of Havaladar

kachori: a fried puff pastry with a savoury filling

kachi: a community of market gardeners

khus: a curtain or hanging made of fragrant grass; it is dampened to give out a sweet smell as well as keep rooms cool during summer

lakh: a sum equal to a hundred thousand

loo: a searing hot wind that blows during the summer months in north India

madarsa: a school for religious instruction as well as teaching usually through the Urdu medium

malai: cream

mann: also called *maund*, it is a measure of weight roughly equivalent to 40 kg

mem: short for memsaheb, or a westernized woman



Panditji: priest or one learned in Hindu religious practices and texts

Parmatma: a form of address for god

puri: a type of deep-fried savoury bread

raita: curd mixed with spices and finely chopped vegetables

rewri: a hard, chewy sweet, a bit like toffee, usually coated with sesame seeds

sadhu: a holy man

Saheb: a form of address for a distinguished person, official or government servant

ser: a ser is roughly the equivalent of a kilogram

seviyan: a sweet usually made with vermicelli, sugar, ghee, nuts, milk, etc.; the dish is associated with the festival of Id when it is specially prepared

thandai: a milky potion made of an assortment of crushed nuts, can be laced with a mild intoxicant

wuzoo: ritual ablutions carried out before namaz, the Muslim prayers offered five times a day

zamindar: feudal landowner

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES

An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth, (abridged),
M. K. Gandhi

Boyhood Days, Rabindranath Tagore

Making a Mango Whistle, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay